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**ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES OF  
SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION**

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Faculty of Educational Sciences  
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## **SESSION I**

# **CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL WORK**



## **Social Work Students’ Perceptions About Practicum Experience (Case of University of Shkodra, Albania)**

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### **Abstract**

Practicum is an integral component of social work education included in the Bachelor program. Students' opinions play an important role in academic decisions. The aim of this study was to explore the social work students' perceptions towards the practicum experience during the third-year Bachelor's Degree in Social Work at the University of Shkodra “Luigj Gurakuqi”. Furthermore, the study analyses the views of social work students about their personal and professional benefits and challenges, the practical implementation of theories and also identify their suggestions for future improvement in the implementation of practicum. The method used in this study was qualitative. Data were gathered from semi-structured interviews and a focus group with respective students. In this study, 37 students from the third year of the Bachelor's program in social work, who graduated during the academic year 2021-2022, participated. It was concluded that students have generally positive and favorable opinions about the practicum experience. The results showed that students have achieved various benefits related to the improvement of communication skills at work, improvisation skills according to the occasion, the possibility of a future career, understanding more about the social worker's impact on people's lives, being more responsible, and better self-awareness. Students perceived their experience as a supervised practice that provides opportunities to reinforce theory in practice, by valuing them as complementary to each other. Difficulties in managing emotions, adapting to the dynamics of interaction with target groups, and the role of being more of an observer than a practitioner of concrete cases are some of the

main challenges encountered during their practice. The students pointed out that some elements should be taken into consideration in the future. It was suggested that practicum should be included throughout all three academic years, accompanied by more space for students' contribution in the respective institutions and organizations. The findings from this study can serve as a database that can be used to discuss and improve the practicum curriculum.

*Key words: Practicum, Social work students, Perception, Benefits, Challenges, Bachelor of social work.*

### **Introduction**

The current curriculum of study in Social Work at the University of Shkoder "Luigj Gurakuqi" is the result of a revision in accordance with the Law 80/2015 "On Higher Education and Scientific Research in the Institutions of Higher Education in Republic of Albania" (Official Journal, No. 164, 2015, p. 11449) and the Council of Minister's Decree No. 41, date 24.01.2018 "On the elements of study programs offered by the institutions of higher education" (Official Journal, No. 6, 2018, p.125).

Regarding the internship/practicum, Shkoder University follows Directive No. 29 dated 10.09.2018 of the Albanian Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth, which outlines the teaching load for academic staff in higher education institutions. According to the directive, students are required to spend one day (5 hours) per week doing practice in a social care institution. The Department cooperates with local public institutions, including the private sector, to facilitate this requirement. To strengthen professional practices, cooperation agreements have been established with local institutions and non-profit associations. In the "Bachelor of Social Work" program, the internship is part of the curriculum and takes place during the third year for a total of 29 weeks.

The practicum is structured as a combination of practical hours spent in institutions or organizations and classroom sessions. Throughout the practicum, students actively participate in discussions, group work, task presentations, and reflections on interventions in specific cases. Additionally, guest speakers from social service-focused institutions or organizations accompany the practicum. This allows students to gain not only theoretical knowledge about the institutions and their operations but also hands-on experience by actively engaging in selected activities that align with the course's objectives.

In 2008, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) adopted a competency-based education framework that shifted the focus of curriculum design from content and structure to student learning outcomes. This approach involves assessing students' ability to demonstrate the competencies identified in the educational policy. The goal of this approach is to ensure that students can integrate and apply these competencies in practice. One of the accreditation standards related to field education requires programs to explain how their field education program provides generalist practice opportunities for students to demonstrate social work competencies with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities, and how this is accomplished in field settings (CSWE, 2015, p.3, 13).

According to Ymeraj (2018, p. 38), Social Work Education needs to focus more on Social Work Practice, not only in terms of hours, but also in terms of the typology and variety of services. To achieve this, a stronger connection and cooperation between schools and institutions would be beneficial, as it would allow social workers to apply their knowledge in various fields, such as health care, education, justice, and social services.

In 2020, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) updated the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training. In relation to Social Work in Practice, education programs must, among other objectives, prepare students to understand the relationship between personal life experiences and personal value systems and social work practice, integrate theory, ethics, and research/knowledge in practice, and develop critically self-reflective practitioners (IASSW–IFSW, 2020, p.12, 13).

Moreover, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics 4.01 Competence, states “social workers should base practice on recognized knowledge, including empirically based knowledge, relevant to social work and social work ethics” (NASW 2017, p. 25).

Bogo (2005) emphasizes that field instruction plays a vital role in shaping social work students. However, it is acknowledged as the most demanding aspect of the social work curriculum, requiring active participation and collaboration from all parties involved to ensure a meaningful and beneficial learning experience.

During their field experience, students may encounter challenges such as having low confidence in their abilities to work with specific clients, experiencing role confusion or conflict, and undergoing emotional strain due to the nature of their work (Gelman, 2004).

As outlined by Frost et al. (2005 & 2008) the practice of social work requires the development of critical, analytical and reasoning skills within degree level education (cited by Joubert, 2020, p.3).

In this context, it is important to understand students' perceptions regarding practicum experiences. Assessing a student social worker's opinion in practice can be challenging because it involves subjective elements. It should also provide opportunities for students to receive feedback, reflect on their practice, and identify areas for improvement. The present study is focused on the perception of social work students towards practicum experiences on four broad aspects. Such as perception towards: (1) Personal and professional benefits, (2) Personal and professional challenges (3) Application of theory into practice and (4) Students' suggestions for future improvement in the implementation of practicum curriculum. The study highlights social work students' perceptions towards practicum experience through semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion.

This study could be a starting point for further and broader discussions on the review and improvement of the curriculum of the practical component in Bachelor's degree programs in social work. The results and reflections of the students can serve as a valuable source of information for the university and the teaching staff regarding the expectations and needs of the students in the field of practice. In this way, the university can improve the curricula and incorporate suggestions and ideas from the students to provide a better practical experience for them in the future.

It is important to emphasize that the participating students also derive personal benefits from this self-reflective experience. The opportunity for reflection provides students with a valuable chance to develop a deeper understanding of themselves. Yip gives an interesting perspective on self-reflection: "Under appropriate conditions, self-reflection can help individual social workers to enhance their personal and professional development in practice" (2006, p. 781).

### **Literature review**

Croisdale-Appleby (2014, p.71) conducted an independent review of social work education in England. He concluded that the role of the Higher Education Institution (HEI) in qualifying education is to provide an education in social work that equips the student to undertake social work in a professional manner in a supported and supervised role. The initial qualification is the entry point to a profession in which learning should



continue throughout the professional life of the individual.

According to Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training, regarding the standards towards programme curricula, schools must consistently ensure helping social work students to develop skills of critical thinking and scholarly attitudes of reasoning and giving specific attention to undertaking constant review and development of the curricula (IASSW–IFSW, 2020, p.10).

The Guide of Supervision in Social Work Field Education, created in 2021 from Australian Learning and Teaching Council in Australia, focused on learning or refreshment regards knowledge about the theory and practice of supervising social work students during their field education placement. That is an important point, as student feedback can provide valuable insights for the development and improvement of social work education programs. It can also help to ensure that the curriculum remains relevant and responsive to the needs of the field and the community it serves. Additionally, involving students in the evaluation process can promote their active participation and engagement in their own learning and professional development.

Assessment of social work students can safeguard both general, public, and professional standards, and service users (Cowburn, 2000). According to Shardlow and Doel (1996), it can be difficult to assess a student social worker's competence in practice because of the subjectivities inherent in some of these processes (cited by Sarhan & Tadam, 2021, p.38).

Furman, Coyne and Negi, (2008, p.72) underline that through self-reflection, social work students and workers may develop the capacity to understand their own feelings, beliefs and behaviors while they are occurring, and ultimately learn to expand their behavioral repertoire in the here-and-now.

Many studies have investigated students' perceptions towards the practicum experiences, part of their education in social work curriculum.

Joubert (2020) explore how social work students perceive the readiness for the workplace during their three-year undergraduate course at two Higher Education Institutions sites in England. Participants described their becoming ready for practice as a developmental journey in which they become more resilient, confident and reflective.

Similarly, Gelman (2004, p.52), focused on assessing foundation year MSW students' level of anxiety regarding several aspects of field learning, including concerns related to their agency, working with clients, the supervisory relationship, and social work education., concluded that

overall, students are experiencing moderate anxiety and have specific concerns about their agency, and their ability to successfully balance all of the requirements of a social work education. Gelman further concludes that if students had received some teaching prior to practice on managing their emotions at the start of the placement experience, they may be significantly less anxious.

The aim of the research by Frost et al. (2013, p.338) was to present the views of undergraduate social work students, from three different regimes (Italy, Sweden and England) with the focus on analyzing in what way at the end of their training they feel ready to practice. An interesting finding from this study, regarding the students' perceptions about the position of practice in education, was that practice placements are believed to be very important by the students from all three countries. Interestingly, Italian students seemed much more positive about the personal growth and development they experienced during the course than their counterparts.

## **Methodology**

### **The purpose of the paper**

This paper aims to explore social work students' perceptions towards the practicum experience during their third-year Bachelor's Degree in Social Work at the University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi". The method used in this study is qualitative. A semi-structured interview was distributed online, including the organization of a focus group discussion (FGD).

The following four research questions guide the study:

RQ1. What are the social work students' perceptions regarding the personal and professional benefits of the practicum experience?

RQ2. What are the social work students' perceptions of the challenges they face during their practicum experience?

RQ3. How do students perceive the application of theory into practice during their practice?

RQ4. What are the students' approaches/suggestions for improving the practicum curriculum in the future?

### **Sampling and general data for the respondents**

The participants were recruited using a purposive sampling method. The study population consisted of 42 students from the third year of the Bachelor's program in Social Work who graduated during the academic year 2021-2022 at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi," Albania. The study sample included N=37

students, as five students chose not to participate in the study and complete the semi-structured interview. Of the 37 participating students, 3 were male and 34 were female (see Table 1). It is worth noting that in our university, the Social Work program is predominantly attended by females. The practice typology referred to social services offered to various vulnerable groups by local institutions and non-profit organizations. The students were mainly involved in working with young people, adults, and children with disabilities, community-based services, and services in the field of family violence.

Table 1 General data of respondents

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Frequency (n =37 )</b>
Female	34
Male	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>

### **Procedure/method of completing the questionnaire**

The semi-structured interviews were completed by the students themselves, who received them via email. The students completed the interviews during June 2022, at the end of the academic year 2021-2022. The focus group was organized during the final week of the students' social work degrees. The participants received a brief explanation regarding the purpose of the research and were informed of the confidentiality measures in place. Participation in the research was voluntary.

### **Instrument and the content of the questionnaire**

#### *Semi-structured interview*

The first research instrument used in this study was an online semi-structured interview consisting of three open-ended questions aimed at exploring the students' perceptions of their practicum experiences.

The semi-structured interview allows for a predetermined number of questions to be used, covering different topics. It reveals the participants' views and reflections in relation to the research field. Therefore, researchers can explore social events by examining the different perspectives of the interviewed subjects (Berg, 2001, p.6). In this study, 37 students completed the online interview. They were asked to indicate their perceived personal and professional benefits and challenges from the practicum. Another focus

of the interview was to gather the students' opinions on the application of theory into practice. The purpose was to understand how their experience had helped them apply the theories they learned over the course of three academic years in various practical activities. The students were also given the opportunity to provide feedback on their practicum experience.

#### *Focus group*

A focus group was conducted with a purposive sample of the same cohort of students who had completed the semi-structured interview. Ten students voluntarily accepted the invitation to take part in the focus group. The aim of the focus group approach was to explore the qualitative findings of their suggestions for future improvements in the implementation of the practicum curriculum. The focus group lasted approximately 40-45 minutes, during which students had the opportunity to introduce new topics based on their practice learning experiences. With permission, the focus group was digitally recorded, and manual notes were also taken.

#### *Method of analysis*

The data were entered into a Microsoft Excel program, and thematic analysis was conducted. Themes based on existing literature and research questions were identified from both the interview and focus group data. The data collected from the interviews and focus groups were analyzed inductively to identify thematic categories. During this process, the themes used by each participant were identified, and corresponding numbers were assigned whenever the themes appeared in each interview.

Similar and overlapping themes were then identified, and a list of themes used by the participants was created. The data were organized into categories, and codes were assigned to each category, marking the initial coding process. In the second stage of data analysis, the interpretation of each category was conducted to determine if they were related to each other in any way, and if there was an opportunity to create alternative categories. The analysis of the interviews resulted in the identification of categories based on the main themes. The similarities and differences between the created categories were analyzed to find commonalities and differences. A narrative description of these categories is presented in the results section.

#### **Limitations**

Although the study aimed to explore student perspectives, it had a limitation in that it relied solely on self-reported data from students, which can be inherently subjective. The study did not incorporate viewpoints from supervisors or practice professors, which could have added a more comprehensive and triangulated perspective. Nonetheless, the study's

primary focus was to explore the student experience during the practicum, which remains a crucial aspect in the ongoing discussion about professional competence in social work.

## Results

### **Social work students' perception of personal and professional benefits from practicum experience**

#### *Personal benefits*

The students were asked two open-ended questions to better understand their perspective on the personal and professional benefits from the practicum experience. These questions provided students with the opportunity to express their opinions. The viewpoints were categorized into two themes: personal and professional benefits. It is evident that a relatively large part of students declare that they have personally benefited from the practicum regarding their ability to better manage their emotions.

*S2 stated that "I learned new ways of coping, how to manage my negative or positive emotions that arise from typical situations we may encounter during work." (S2)*

Personal benefits of students related to the internship are also significantly linked to the ability to be more empathetic, building self-confidence related to their profession, and providing a greater opportunity to get to know themselves. Some of the students' opinions on this topic include the following:

*S11 stated that "I have learned to be more accepting of people from different backgrounds and experiences, by gaining a deeper understanding of their challenges and struggles through personal interactions and experiences." S13 expressed that "I feel more secure and prepared for work."; "During the internship, I have been able to distinguish between my personal and professional self."(S 20)*

Furthermore, some students have reported that the personal benefits gained from practice experience are related to a better understanding of the impact of social workers on people's lives, a sense of responsibility at work, socialization, motivation for the profession, and the opportunity to be open-minded. Students express their opinions very clearly regarding these benefits. Some of them are given below:

*"They opened our eyes to who an actual client was and how our choices had an impact on someone's life." (S 23)*

*"Socializing (being in contact with new people) played a role in my introverted nature, making me more social, practical, and informal." (S 26)*

*"Increased desire to work in the social worker profession (the internship was very diverse in projects, activities, specific cases, processes, which increased my interest more and more)." (S 28)*

### **Professional benefits**

The majority of students evaluate the internship in the professional dimension as an opportunity to apply the theories learned during the academic process in the social work curriculum. Student 34 expressed more detailed thoughts on this matter:

*"During the internship, we have seen, heard, and learned a lot about the circumstances, factors, consequences, and needs that arise from the emergence of these social problems from some specific cases handled by the respective social workers in the category that included the case."*

Collaboration in groups and with the teams of institutions and organizations is another important professional benefit for students. Regarding this element, students declare that they have learned to be more cooperative in groups and to undertake the completion of specific tasks. For instance, S7 stated that *"Collaboration with clients as well as with other members of the center and working in a team were some new things as well as benefits for me!"* S20 expressed their view that *"I was able to improve my skills in collaboration and interaction with others."*

Career path selection and future career opportunities have been perceived by students as significant professional benefits resulting from practicum experience. The students express that the internship has helped them to know where to focus in their future career. According to them, this was achieved through the recognition of the various roles of social workers and the different employment opportunities. Students express their opinions regarding these benefits, such as:

*"The practice gave us direction on where we wanted to focus for our future careers." (S 2)*

*"I managed to create a network of connections with people who could potentially be my colleagues in the place where I might work." (S 33).*

Furthermore, the students declare that the internship has brought them other benefits in terms of improving their professional communication, addressing client needs, making assessments, being more creative and improving their questioning techniques towards clients. It is also important that they perceive the opportunity to understand the need for further qualifications as a benefit provided by the internship. Some of their

viewpoints are as follows:

*"I learned how to be more mature when speaking during this journey." (S 36)*

*"I learned how to be more adaptable and adjust my behavior accordingly when dealing with different situations and personalities. I also learned to step out of the theoretical framework in some cases when necessary." (S 19)*

*"I have learned a lot about formulating questions, when and how they should be asked so as not to influence the client, as well as how to collaborate with the client." (S 4)*

### **Social work students' perception of personal and professional challenges about practicum experience**

#### ***Personal challenges***

Mainly, a considerable number of students perceive personal challenges during their internship, such as difficulties in communicating with clients and specific target groups, such as the Rom community, the elderly or with children. Additionally, students see it as a challenge to be accepted by the target groups with whom they have worked during the internship. They stated that it was challenging in many cases to understand and adapt to their dynamics. Some of their viewpoints are as follows:

*"Some of the elderly people did not want to speak with us at all and did not want gifts, but by communicating with the appropriate language, that barrier was broken and they approached us." (S 4)*

*"A challenge for me has been the field projects where we have contact with people, some of whom were not cooperative... the client of the center found it a bit difficult to express herself since I was new there." (S 8)*

*"Some of the elderly people did not want to speak with us at all and did not want gifts, but by communicating with the appropriate language, that barrier was broken and they approached us." (S 36)*

A small number of the students have perceived as a personal challenge their ability to manage emotions in contact with clients or staff. This is particularly true during the first days of the internship or in cases where they had to organize activities themselves. For example, S14 stated that *"In the first days, I was tense and hesitant to ask about everything because I didn't feel comfortable to satisfy my curiosity."*

#### ***Professional challenges***

Regarding professional challenges, students generally express that they have not had professional challenges. However, a small number of students perceived some challenges towards the staff of host institutions and organizations. Thus, they explained that in some cases the staff did not take

the interns seriously, asked for more flexibility in the schedule and day of the internship, as well as more space for student interventions. The role as an observer rather than a practitioner of specific cases, was identified as a professional challenge.

*"We have almost always been in the role of observers, so it's not that we have worked on a specific case to test ourselves on the intervention we could make." (S 9)*

*"My insistence on having more cases and getting closer to them." (37)*

In a few cases, the insufficiency of theory to be applied in practice was identified as a challenge. For example, S12 stated that *"Regardless of how advanced theories we learn, still practicing and not applying the theories in practice creates even more problems."*

#### **Students' opinions towards the application of theory into practice during their practicum experiences**

The majority of students value their internship as a good opportunity to apply theory into practice. They support the idea that practice reinforces theory and in many cases facilitates the process of developing professional skills. Expressions such as empathy and communication, that are theoretically taught, are better understood and practiced during the internship with different target groups. Additionally, most students declare that practice and theory are complementary to each other. Some students' opinions on this subject are as follows:

*"The last days of my internship, as I looked back, I realized that in reality, the internship has been a very good complement to the theory and that neither one is complete without the other." (S 23)*

*"The combination of theory and practice can be somewhat the key to success. Through the knowledge I have gained during these years and putting them into practice has also helped me not to "fail" in my relationship with the client." (S 26)*

*"Theories of social work have helped me during my practice to analyze client cases, create interventions and assessments, based on the case management approaches I have reviewed." (S 3)*

Furthermore, a considerable number of students highlight the fact that practice is a necessity before entering the profession and as an opportunity for self-awareness and emotional recognition. For example, S11 stated that:

*"Helped me to know myself and what I want for my own life, to love the profession in such a way that I can successfully fulfill my duty as a social worker, I learned how to cope with the problems that arise at work."*



### **Students' approach/suggestions for future improvement of practicum curriculum**

The focus group focused on the discussions of students regarding their suggestions and opinions to improve the internship in the future. This was based on their perspectives and perceptions gathered from their experiences. The students (n=10) actively participated in the focus and present different ideas for improving the practice in the future. Almost half of them, suggest that the practice should be extended to three years or accompanied by more practical hours during the week.

Regarding this, the students point out that this would make it possible for them to benefit more from the variety of activities on different days, to get to know more practical aspects of the profession in the first or second year, and by spending more time in practice, they would gain more credibility among the target groups. Interesting opinions are expressed by the students regarding this aspect.

*"The internship should be extended and allowed even in the first and second years as it is a valuable experience rich in knowledge that never ends." (S 1)*

*"I would have liked if more importance was given to practical experience and if I could have had more opportunities to practice more than once a week, so that as a student I could have had even more chances to develop other skills of the profession." (S 4)*

*"Being involved during other days or spending more hours at the center would have allowed me to create more confidence among the beneficiaries, therefore I would have preferred to have a greater involvement in the practice and to spend more time in the center." (S 10)*

A small number of students also express some concerns regarding their involvement in the practice and provide their suggestions for improvement. They should have more space to contribute to the practice in the services of organizations, having more active roles and freedom to take initiatives beyond the existing services that students are involved in. For example, S2 stated that *"I believe that it would have served greatly in improving the practical experience if each group had the opportunity to engage in a specific case or to organize an activity with a specific chosen theme and directed by the group of social work practice."*

In some cases, students suggest that there should be greater diversity during the internship, having the opportunity to change institutions or organizations, providing them with student cards during the internship, and in some cases having more positive relationships between staff and

students, so that they feel more comfortable exchanging their ideas.

*"Since there is a wide variation of roles of a social worker and the target groups they work with, if possible, the student should have the opportunity to change institutions during the next year so that they can experience the work of a social worker in different aspects and roles." (S 8)*

### **Discussions and conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to explore social work students' perceptions of practicum experiences. Qualitative data was collected on students' perceptions of the benefits, challenges, and integration of theory into practice, as well as suggestions for future improvement of the practicum curriculum. The findings indicated that students generally had positive perceptions of the practicum experience.

Practical experience is increasingly becoming an important part of a student's education. It is not enough to just learn theoretical concepts, but students need to have practical knowledge to become successful professionals. When it comes to social work, this practical experience can be especially valuable, as it helps students develop a range of personal and professional skills.

One of the most important benefits that students declare from practical experience is the improvement of emotional management skills. Another significant benefit of practical experience is increased self-awareness. Furthermore, practical experience helps students develop empathy and understanding towards others. In general, students perceive practice as an important experience in their professional development and in improving their communication skills. According to students, this experience can help them expand their knowledge and skills in the field of social work and prepare them to become successful professionals in this field. Additionally, it can assist in developing communication and interaction skills with clients and communities, as well as improving skills in analyzing cases and intervening in various situations. Overall, practical experience can provide a better perspective for a deeper understanding of the field and can help in expanding professional horizons and establishing a successful career path. The majority of students see practice as an opportunity to apply theory into practice and gain new experiences, while others see it as a valuable challenge to develop their communication skills and improve their professional abilities. These findings are consistent with previous studies. In the research by Frost et al. (2013), which aimed to present the views of undergraduate social work students, from three different regimes (Italy,

Sweden and England), was found that the practice seems to fulfill different needs and roles for different students, such as: understanding what social work is about and getting a chance to test themselves and their future capabilities in social work. Joubert (2020) explored how social work students perceive the readiness for the workplace during their three-year undergraduate course at two Higher Education Institutions sites in England. Participants described their becoming ready for practice as a developmental journey in which they become more resilient, confident and reflective. In the study conducted by Wilson & Kelly (2010) at Queen's University Belfast in the MSW program, which aimed to develop evidence-based knowledge in this field by considering students' perceptions at different stages of their social work education, focusing on the strengths and limitations of preparatory teaching and their practical learning experience, it was concluded that students were generally very satisfied with the support received from practice teachers in facilitating their learning. While 60 percent of students felt competent and 7 percent very competent in their ability to engage in reflective practice. Assessing satisfaction is still important since satisfaction is likely linked to motivation, and motivation is a key component in determining preparedness of field students. (Karen, Caroline, Tara, 2012, p.9).

Many students face personal challenges during their academic journey, communication and emotional management are two common areas where they may struggle. Specifically, some students report difficulty communicating effectively with certain target groups, as well as managing their emotions when interacting with staff and clients, during the practicum experience. During their practical experience, many students express their opinions about the professional challenges they face. In some cases, they express a desire for more space to handle specific cases and not just play the role of an observer. Additionally, they request to be taken more seriously by their supervisors at the organizations where they are interning. In similar studies regarding students' perceptions of practice, similar concerns are presented as those in the current study. In Gelman's study about anxiety and fears of social work students (n=60) before and during their professional practice, their fears (51% of them) of working with clients were expressed due to reasons such as clients being mandated, resistant, lacking motivation, having complex and multiple problems, and being different in various ways from the interns. Additionally, around 71% of students expressed fear that their supervisors would not take them seriously or have enough time to dedicate to them and prepare them

adequately (2004, p.45, 46).

A significant number of students see practice as reinforcing theory and an opportunity to apply the theories learned during different courses in the curriculum. They see practice as complementary to theory. They also consider practice as an opportunity to get to know themselves and their emotions better.

Indeed, the reflections and suggestions of students for improving future practice are quite interesting. The majority of students (FGD) declare that internship should have more hours available per week, preferably spread over the three years of their studies. Some suggest that students should have more opportunities to be creative and to have more space to contribute to relevant institutions and organizations. They also propose the idea of exchanging institutions during the internship year in order to get to know more aspects of social work up close. All of these, according to them, would help students expand their knowledge and skills in the field of social work and prepare them to become successful professionals in this field. This perspective of providing more opportunities for students is also presented by Croisdale-Appleby, throughout the study on the review of social work education. The greatest opportunity to improve the quality of qualifying education lies in having a sufficient number of practice placements of the highest quality and the educational supervision necessary to ensure their potential is delivered. Practice placements settings should be with a wide range of user groups including where there are integrated care pathways that draw on wider community services and resources (2014, p.86).

### **Potential recommendations**

It's important to consider students' opinions and experiences in order to make meaningful changes to the practice and create a more supportive and fulfilling learning environment. The findings of this study suggest the following areas for consideration:

- Inclusion of self-reflection experience and analysis of practice by students during the implementation of the practicum curriculum. This would help students to identify the problems encountered and share their experiences with each other, seeking the support of the practicum supervisor.
- Detailed discussions with practicum supervisors in institutions and organizations to create more opportunities for student initiatives and

involvement. This provides more chances for students to take initiatives within the ethical and institutional policies and guidelines.

- Based on the problems presented by the students, it is necessary to pay more attention during different courses of the social work curriculum to the opportunity to equip and empower students with expressions and techniques for emotional management and effective application of empathy in their future professional careers.
- Strategic discussions and collaborations between supervisors and lectures of practicum regarding the analysis of organizational factors and support for students, in reference to challenges expressed by the students.
- The exchange of institutions and organizations among students can be considered as an option. This can be done by making this change from one semester to another. Although students have scheduled hours in the auditorium, where they learn about the experiences of different groups and present their practical work, this is highlighted as necessary by the students.

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## **Vulnerable Youth Employment. Challenges and Opportunities (Case of Shkoder Municipality)**

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### **Abstract**

Nowadays the youth of our country are dealing with the social phenomenon of unemployment. Referring to this situation a lot of social projects and programs are being implemented to promote their employment. The government and the third sector are contributing on this. The employability of young people, especially those considered vulnerable, has been the focus of many projects implemented by various NGOs that hold their activity in the Municipality of Shkoder. Such projects, in addition to promoting and intensifying interinstitutional collaboration, have highlighted many challenges expected to find solutions in the future, but have also included successful models and working practices for integration of youth into the labour market. In this study, based on qualitative approach and on analysis of 2 focus groups (one with youth beneficiary of workable projects and one with professional/project implementers), also in 10 interviews with young people, we'll try to offer a panorama about the challenges and opportunities of working with the target group of social disadvantages youth. The research questions are related to the difficulties that vulnerable young faced to find a job, and which are some successful practices or models suggested by project managers and their partners, that facilitate workability. In conclusion, vulnerable youth category represents a challenge for integration into the labour market, especially regards of lack to soft skills or internship experiences. In the meantime, the employers should develop working models, that help to keep workers motivation in high levels, as offering mentoring service.

*Key words: Employability, Vulnerable youth, Challenges, Best practices.*



## **Introduction**

To be a vulnerable and unemployed young person in the perspective of a social worker is considered a denial of the opportunity to benefit from human rights and, in the framework of the welfare state, as an indicator of the lack of adequate policies and programs to address this need (Frøyland, 2019).

The reason why society is so concerned about youth employment is also related to the characteristics of this life phase, which is considered among the most productive in terms of identity development and learning life and professional skills (Perret-Clermont, 2004: 4, cf. Bernhardt et al., 2014).

### **Vulnerable youth and unemployment**

The definition of the term "youth" is observed to vary from one state or region to another, as well as in reference to different social programs (Goldin et al., 2015: 37). According to Law No. 75/2019 on Youth in our country, all individuals aged 15-29 are considered part of this age group. However, according to the definition of the United Nations, all persons between the ages of 15 and 24 are defined as youth, or according to the African Union, individuals between the ages of 15 and 35 (UNECA, 2009: 11, cf. Bernhardt et al, 2014).

While there may be diverse options in determining/defining the chronological age, the psychosocial definition presents youth as a uniform concept where the youth is considered a transitional stage in an individual's life, from the adolescent period to adulthood, associated with significant physical, emotional, and social changes that can be challenging to navigate. Fortunately, some young people have the support of their families or social circles during this transition, while many others cope with great challenges on their own, often referred to as "vulnerable youth" (Ghazi, 2021: 13-14).

The term "vulnerable youth," although it may be perceived as stigmatizing, is widely used in literature to refer to a category of young people who are more exposed to facing various disadvantages as a result of the social contexts in which they live or influenced by their own irresponsible and risky behaviors as individuals. Therefore, to understand the term correctly, we need to learn to distinguish the individual from the "vulnerable" reality in which they may be a part of or affected by. Not necessarily are young people defined as part of the vulnerable category deficient or weak in a specific situation or social context; on the contrary, they may possess excellent coping abilities. In fact, various researchers have identified several categories of vulnerable youth, including those living in care

institutions, those who have left their families, those involved in the justice system, individuals with disabilities, those experiencing mental health issues, school dropouts, those lacking social connections, unmarried mothers, and members of minority groups, among others (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2014: 4).

Regarding this target group, it is evident that the major efforts of social policy makers have focused on developing life skills and enhancing their employability. Employment is considered the only opportunity for these young people to live independently and with dignity. Unemployment, especially among young people, leads to an insecure future, poverty, and signals states of an impoverished economy (Goldin, et al., 2015: 38).

### **The situation of youth unemployment worldwide and in Albania**

The global COVID-19 crisis has had a major impact on shrinking the employment market worldwide, especially for young people. This situation has led to an increase in the number of unemployed young individuals who are outside the education system. Statistics show that globally, 1 in 5 young people currently have NEET status (“Not in Education, Employment, or Training”). Based on these facts, the future appears bleak, as the active labor force is facing pronounced economic deficiencies resulting from unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, and consequently, a lack of work experience. The long-term consequences of all these are expected to lead to delays or prolonged time for their social integration. The only sectors of employment that have shown an increase in numbers after the pandemic are those in the healthcare and social work sectors, which are considered more protected against informality but exposed to temporary work contracts (ILO, 2022: 177, 239).

Meanwhile, according to statistical data on youth employment in the Western Balkans, there is an increase in the number of young people who are neither attending school nor engaged in employment or training (NEET). The data show that Albania, among all the countries in the region, has the highest rate of NEET youth with basic education, and the most vulnerable to social exclusion are precisely the so-called vulnerable youth coming from socio-economically disadvantaged contexts such as impoverished families, minorities, etc. (Ramhorst, 2021).

Furthermore, according to the National Employment Strategy 2019-2022 :5, the number of young people aged 15-24 who are neither in education, nor employment or training (NEET) remains high (28.6% in 2018, compared to the EU average of 10.6%). Albania is also facing the

phenomenon of population decline, where one of the main influential factors is considered to be emigration. The age groups that emigrate are relatively young (20-44 years old), causing significant negative effects on the country's economy, particularly in terms of a decline in state welfare revenues (Byrne et al., 2021).

To help improve this situation, the creation and implementation of youth employment programs are expected to be implemented. Based on the National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020, social organizations play a significant role in identifying, informing, and facilitating youth self-employment.

Moreover, coordination efforts among young participants in youth organizations, as well as the active role of social workers in the community, can play a key role in identifying young people who may be at increased risk of becoming NEET. To address the need for more education and employment opportunities for young people in the Western Balkans, the EU (European Commission) unveiled an ambitious plan for the Economy and Investment in 2020, which includes the Youth Guarantee program. This program aims to provide young people with employment, continued education, or apprenticeship opportunities when they dropped out of school or became unemployed (Ramhorst, 2021: 13, 39).

In this context of developments, social policies in the employment sector in our country will focus on a gradual transition from passive to active policies, with particular attention given to the labour integration of specific groups at risk of social exclusion (Ministry of Finance and Economic, SDC, UNDP, 2019-2022:10:18-19).

The intervention methodologies proposed by researchers supporting/promoting the expand of youth employment opportunities include public and private sector partnership or collaboration with the NGOs, working together/networking (*link*) knowledge sharing (*learn*), and self-employment (*leverage*) (Goldin et al., 2015: 37-38).

### **The role of local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the Municipality of Shkoder in supporting the employability of vulnerable youth<sup>1</sup>**

In recent years, many local NGOs operating in the Municipality of Shkoder, based on social policy developments that prioritize youth

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<sup>1</sup> The information regarding the social projects has been obtained from official sources of each respective NGO.

programs, have been engaged in providing social programs to promote the employability of vulnerable youth. These programs include courses to develop soft skills and practical knowledge about professions or crafts, as well as supporting the development of business ideas and the creation of social enterprises.

The need for social programs that focus on increasing youth employment opportunities is crucial for the Municipality of Shkoder, which, after the capital city, according to Hoxha et al., (2016) has the highest number of social institutions in its territory for vulnerable groups, such as children without parental care, youth with disabilities, and representatives of the Roma and Egyptian minorities. Meantime, the strong tradition of collaboration with social organizations in this municipality had a positive impact on addressing various social issues (Topalli, 2020: 6), particularly unemployment among vulnerable youth.

Specifically, over the past three years in the Municipality of Shkoder, many local NGOs have focused their social projects on increasing employability among vulnerable youth. The targeted categories for inclusion in these projects have been young people living in social care institutions or orphanages, individuals with disabilities, rural youth, and others living in economically disadvantaged families. The age criterion has often been a theme of discussion in these projects since our legislation defined the youth age range as 15-29 years, but many projects, recognizing the need for training, professional qualifications, and youth employment, have extended the age limit for participants up to 35 years.

One such project is the "Community of the Future" implemented by the Youth NGO "Arka," which focuses on orphaned youth living in families or institutions. This project has provided training to 60 young people, and 88 of them have been employed. Another successful project by this organization has been the reintegration of returnees into the Albanian labor market.

"The Door" NGO has implemented a two-year project aimed at promoting youth employability entitled "Healthy Youth, Secure Future." The objectives of this project include providing training on life skills (soft skills) and job integration (hard skills) through professional courses, internships with businesses, employment, and providing micro-grants for self-employment. This project has provided employability training to 65 young people aged 16-35. Additionally, 11 young people have completed professional courses in cooking, hairdressing, and IT, and have gained paid internships and grants for self-employment.

Another impactful project in the youth employment sector in the Municipality of Shkoder is "Youth Overcoming Unemployment Regionally through Job Opportunities on the Balkans/ "YOUR JOB," implemented by Caritas Diocesan Shkoder -Pult in two time periods: 2019-2022 and the second phase from 2023-2025 (ongoing). The target groups of this project are unemployed youth, those facing socioeconomic difficulties, minority groups, and persons with disabilities. The ultimate goal is to provide opportunities for inclusion in the labor market for young people from these vulnerable target groups. The age group of the beneficiaries is set to be between 15 and 35 years old, and around 800 young people are expected to benefit from this project. Among the projects, Caritas has also implemented the "COEX" project from 2021 to 2023 in three municipalities, including Shkoder, with a significant impact. The main target group of this project has been girls and women. Specifically, around 81 girls and women have benefited from this project through vocational training, internships, and participation in soft skills training.

Lastly, in support of the employment of persons with disabilities, the "ACCENT" project is being implemented by Project Shpresa. The focus of this project is to promote equal opportunities regarding access, employability, and advancement in the labor market for this target group.

Accordingly, given the high number of social projects implemented in the Municipality of Shkoder in the past three years to promote the inclusion of vulnerable youth in the labor market, efforts have been made to conduct a social study on the challenges and achievements of this process base on the perspectives of professionals, service providers, and the young people as beneficiaries of such projects.

### **Methodology**

The realization of this study has utilized various types of literature, such as research reports, scientific articles, local social policy documents, evaluation reports of social projects conducted by local NGOs, as well as primary data collected through focus groups and interviews. The aim of this study is to highlight the challenges and achievements faced by vulnerable youth, as well as professionals engaged in the implementation of social projects for employment promotion. The research questions of this study focus on three areas:

- 1. What is the current panorama of employment for vulnerable youth in the world, region, and our country?*

2. *What are some social projects implemented by local NGOs in the Municipality of Shkodër related to the employment of vulnerable youth?*
3. *What achievements and challenges do the providers and beneficiaries of these projects observe regarding the employment of vulnerable youth?*

In order to answer the research questions, the authors relied on a qualitative research approach. They conducted one focus group consisting of 12 professionals directly involved or collaborating in the implementation of employment-focused social programs carried out by local NGOs in Shkodër. Additionally, they conducted another focus group with 9 young beneficiaries of employment projects and conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with young individuals, who obtained employment contracts or grants for self-employment.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted face-to-face and recorded either in audio format or through note-taking, after informing the participants about the study. The study sample consisted solely of individuals involved in the aforementioned social programs implemented by the NGOs aforementioned in this article.

The study sample was *purposively* selected. It is not probabilistic and does not aim to be statistically representative of a population. Instead, the participants in this sample are considered representative based on the researcher's judgment or the study's purpose (Babbie, 2004:183). For the analysis of the collected data from the focus groups and interviews, content and interpretive analysis were employed; due to the fact that qualitative analysis involves the process of segmenting, categorizing, and linking aspects of the data before reaching their final interpretation. The aim of this phase is to describe and understand the data by exploring to find their meaning, similarities, and differences (Matthews, 2010: 373-374).

As for the ethical considerations in research, audio recordings and analysis of the interviews will be archived and used solely for study purposes. Access to them will only be granted in an authorized manner by the study organizers.

### **Data Analysis**

Based on the analysis of the field data collected for this study, several *broad categories* were identified and further organized into subcategories for discussion in this study.

From the analysis of the focus groups and individual interviews, the following four *categories* were identified:

1. Needs of young people regarding their employment situation from two perspectives (professionals and beneficiaries).
2. Challenges faced by young individuals regarding their employment situation from two perspectives (professionals and beneficiaries).
3. Achievements of young individuals as a result of their participation in employment programs, according to the perspectives of professionals and beneficiaries.
4. Strategies to improve youth employment programs, according to the perspectives of professionals and beneficiaries.

During the data analysis process, the above categories were further divided into 48 subcategories that provide a more detailed manner the interviewees' viewpoint.

#### **I.**

- a. Independent living employment*
- b. Multidisciplinary teams for youth employment iintegration*
- c. Lack of job-seeking and soft skills*
- d. Early career counseling*
- e. Integration of employment Projects with social support*
- f. Higher motivational salaries*
- g. Lack of diverse job options*
- h. Working conditions*
- i. Lack of work experience*
- j. Fixed jobs*
- k. Knowledge development*

#### **II.**

- l. Strengthening collaboration in networks*
- m. Shorter counseling cycles*
- n. Payment discrepancies between internships and work placement*
- o. Biases and barriers in the employment of persons with disabilities*
- p. Lack of information from youth about training opportunities*
- q. Raising awareness of the social role of businesses*
- r. Lack of part-time available jobs (labour market)*
- s. Youth's unrealistic expectations of high salaries and positions*
- t. Mindset (only traditional and stereotypical jobs, particularly for women)*
- u. Demotivating low wages*
- v. Workplace exploitation*
- w. Women's invisible work*
- x. Lack of work experience*
- y. Survivability in the job market*
- z. Self-improvement*

### **III.**

- a. *a. Collaboration in networks has led to employment opportunities.*
- b. *b. Successful employment through startups/grants.*
- c. *c. High interest from young people in paid internships.*
- d. *d. School-to-work linkage.*
- e. *e. Training in other job skills.*
- f. *f. Commitment to employment.*
- g. *g. Updated job information (laws and regulations).*
- h. *h. New job skills (hard and soft skills).*

### **IV.**

- ii. *Active role for social administrators in identifying young people in need of employment.*
- jj. *Mentoring of job apprentices.*
- kk. *Soft skills training.*
- ll. *Inclusion of psychologists in multidisciplinary groups.*
- mm. *Monitoring the implementation of policies for youth employment.*
- nn. *Promotion of successful youth models through their efforts.*
- oo. *Greater seriousness in professional practices.*
- pp. *Unified mechanized coordination for youth employment entry.*
- qq. *Maintaining and expanding job contact networks.*
- rr. *Employment office.*
- ss. *Employment with contracts.*
- tt. *Increase in part-time employment.*
- uu. *More training opportunities for employability.*

The findings from the data analysis presented in this study will be complemented by paraphrases extracted from interviews with the participants, which will be discussed and compared with similar studies in this field.

## **Discussions**

The youth employment needs were identified from two distinct perspectives: that of professionals and beneficiaries.

The significance of inclusion in the job market for vulnerable youth is considered their best opportunity for social inclusion. As emphasized by one of the representatives from the collaborating group with the NGO in social employment projects, *"Our institution's task is to gradually prepare a young person to integrate into real life and cope with it. Employment is a good start. We feel very proud when one of our young people gets employed. To reach this goal, the assistance of our collaborators in identifying opportunities in the field of youth employment is vital for us"* (focus group with professionals - code 1).



Establishing a cohesive network of institutions and professionals from various disciplinary fields is deemed highly essential to support vulnerable youth. Frequently, as expressed by some participants in the professional focus group, they often feel completely alone when facing with the challenge of finding employment for vulnerable young individuals, as highlighted by one of the participants in the focus group: "*The 9-year schools are currently lacking in terms of career counseling and professional guidance*" (focus group with professionals - code 7). This causes a lack of guidance or delays in choosing the proper education and finding employment opportunities. According to the perspective of young people, some of them emphasize the need for more job positions with fixed contracts and more motivating salary levels. As expressed by a young participant in the focus group, "*Salaries pose a significant problem. I don't expect high salaries because I know that it remains unfulfilled here, and this is the reason why people choose to emigrate*" (focus group with young people - code 3). What is more, the lack of a profession/trade or work experience results in a loss of social contacts and, consequently, leads to social exclusion or a decline in work motivation. One of the young participants in the interview emphasizes, "*I try to participate in various training programs to learn new things about employability, to be open to opportunities with the aim of improving myself and adding more value. I believe that training focused on communication, collaboration, etc., is invaluable for us as adolescents as it enhances our knowledge and boosts our motivation towards employment*" (interview with young people - code 6).

**The challenges faced by young people in relation to their employment situation are viewed from two distinct perspectives: that of professionals and beneficiaries.**

According to professionals working in the social sector with vulnerable young people, the challenges related to their employment primarily revolve around collaboration within networks, the selection of appropriate working methodologies, and combating prevalent prejudice among employers, particularly towards vulnerable young individuals with disabilities.

*"For the young people in our institution, the work-life integration poses a challenge, as they come from highly disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds. To achieve this goal, we need to collaborate with other partners in the community, as the institution's staff alone cannot accomplish it"* (focus group with professionals - code 1).

*"Frequently, the methodologies we use to promote employability are*

*inadequate, and the counseling cycles take too long. It is crucial to understand that this category of young people has a fundamental need to enter the job market as the earliest opportunity" (focus group with professionals - code 2).*

*"When we negotiate internship agreements with businesses, we discuss and encourage the possibility of the young person being employed by the business after the first 3-month paid internship funded by the project, or we transition to a 50% funding model. Unfortunately, I have noticed that internship payments are often higher than wages, which is highly discouraging for the young person. Additionally, employing individuals with disabilities remains a challenge due to their continuity at work, limited work infrastructure, and prejudice that labels them as unfit for the employment sector" (focus group with professionals - code 3).*

Another challenging aspect highlighted by vulnerable young participants in the focus group and interviews is the prevailing mentality surrounding their status and employment, particularly in the case of girls and women. The lack of opportunities for work experience poses a significant obstacle due to the limited availability of part-time jobs in the market. This limitation affects young people who are still studying and wish to work, as well as young mothers.

*"- Fanaticism, I believe, becomes a barrier for women like us. For instance, certain positions such as receptionists in hotels, waitresses, or bank tellers are perceived as unsuitable jobs. In reality, these sectors also offer numerous employment opportunities." (Focus group with young people - code 8).*

*"- I have also lived abroad where young people are taught to work from an early age. However, here we tend to strongly associate work with education, meaning that we only want to work in the field we have studied, while any job should be considered honorable. This complex mindset delays our job search." (Focus group with young people - code 7).*

*"- Actually, right now I'm focused on school, but I would have liked to combine both in the future." (Interview with young people - code 6).*

As outlined in the National Strategy for Employment and Skills (2019-2022:4), despite significant improvements, Albania still faces important challenges in terms of providing secure and high-quality employment, especially for young people, whose participation rate is lower compared to the rest of the population (50.1 percent, with a gender gap of over 16 percent), particularly among vulnerable youth groups.

### **The achievements of young people resulting from their participation in employability programs, from the perspectives of professionals and the beneficiaries**

Meanwhile, some of the significant advancements in the realm of employment for vulnerable youth are recognized and acknowledged by both the young individuals themselves and professionals working in the field. These include the positive role of paid internships, start-ups/business ventures, school collaborations with the labor market, and participation in training programs to enhance employability.

*"- The experience of start-ups, where young people have the opportunity to explore their skills and job grants, has resulted very productive"* (focus group with professionals - code 2).

*"- Collaboration with multiple institutions has brought about positive outcomes, as we have had successful cases of integrating vulnerable young people into employment"* (focus group with professionals - code 1).

*"- The increase in the number of preparatory courses for young people and others has aided them in preparing for entry into the job market"* (focus group with professionals- code 12).

*"-Participation in employability projects has increased my awareness of employment regulations linked to the importance of working with contracts, insurance coverage, and minimum wages"* (interview with young beneficiaries - code 8).

*"- Even though I am working in a job that I consider temporary, I am also trying to train myself in other skills"* (focus group with young people - code 8).

*"- I believe that work is self-developing for every individual. Despite the challenges and difficulties, we should not lose touch with the job market. That's why I participate in employability programs"* (focus group with young people - code 7).

*"- I learned about the Employment Office during participation in a training course, which provides opportunities on how to seek jobs"* (focus group with young people - code 4).

### **Strategies for enhancing employability programs for young people: Insights from professionals and beneficiaries.**

Such achievements and challenges in these social projects have helped social organizations, their collaborators and young people, to identify some positive strategies for facilitating access to the labor market. Some of these strategies encompass various aspects: highlighting the future role of professionals like social administrators or psychologists, the need for

ongoing soft skills training for both young people and businesses, the need to establish a unified mechanism of institutional networks, monitoring the enforcement of specific laws regarding the employment of vulnerable categories like people with disabilities, and mentoring job scholarships or promotions.

*"- I think these efforts lack a common denominator. Perhaps a unified mechanism should be established to continuously coordinate the efforts to empower young people for employment."* (Focus group with professionals - code 14).

*"- Maybe NGOs have the task of promoting such youth models through social projects, which can then be taken as examples."* (Focus group with professionals -code 6).

*"- I also believe that our schools need to give importance to the implementation of professional internships with businesses or various institutions. They should take the internships more seriously. Internships are essential, as this period can be very valuable for finding employment opportunities. This recruitment opportunity for work also boosts the motivation of young people to pursue further professional development and internships."* (Focus group with professionals -code 7).

*"- I suggest that women who work with families should at least prioritize part-time employment. It's not the maximum, but it can be beneficial!"* (Focus group with young people-code 3).

*"- I believe that employment should aim for insurance and minimum wages. We lose many benefits from working without a contract!"* (Focus group with young people-code 8).

*"- The more training for employability for young people, the more crucial information for quick orientation in the job market, and they serve as good points of contact for young people to get to know different experiences of their peers and learn something new from one another."* (Interview with young people-code 5).

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

1. Youth employment is an urgent need in our society due to the highest unemployment rates among young people, and vulnerable youth face a heightened risk of social exclusion.
2. Employment programs for young people should be given a paramount importance within social services, as youth employment is a guarantee to an independent and dignified life, as well as a stronger social state.

3. Due to the diversity of public and private social institutions operating in the Municipality of Shkoder, beneficiaries of which include so-called vulnerable youth categories, the professional training programs or integration into the labor market are so necessary.

4. Local social organizations in the Municipality of Shkoder are playing a dynamic role in improving the social inclusion of young people by offering employment programs that range from enhancing soft skills to exploring creative abilities and entrepreneurial opportunities for vulnerable youth. They are also assisting in the creation of successful models of collaboration between the public and private sectors of social services and businesses.

5. Projects implemented by organizations in Shkoder that target vulnerable youth have primarily focused on several groups such as orphaned youth, persons with disabilities, children from low-income families and rural areas, as well as girls and women.

6. The most notable achievements of these programs are evident in the high number of young people who have benefited from services provided, thereby gaining new skills in the workforce as a result of internships, job scholarships, and the opportunity to prove themselves in the business field through start-ups.

7. In addition, the implementation of these programs has made social service providers aware of the need to establish unified networks of cooperation among institutions as a means to include as many young people as possible in the labor market, especially those who fall under the category of NEET (not in employment, education or training) and are not registered as job seekers in any institution.

8. The involvement of young people in these projects, as well as benefiting from the numerous opportunities they offer, has enable young people to explore their skills in the job market by enhancing their professional capacities through training, paid internships, and the creation and implementation of business ideas by the youth themselves.

9. These programs are bringing about a gradual shift in young people's perspective on how to approach the job market and acquiring the necessary knowledge for employment in today's world.

We highly recommend working more on increasing the visibility of these social programs in the future to ensure that young people can easily access information about the opportunities they offer. Additionally, we hope that these programs will have a positive impact on businesses, particularly in terms of their social function.

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## **Economic Reintegration of Return Migrants in Albania - Obstacles, Policies and Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the social and economic reintegration of return migrants in Albania, along with the related policies, challenges, and achievements. The authors used a qualitative design and a thematic analysis approach to investigate the experiences of eleven families who have returned to Albania from Italy and Greece due to the recession crisis. The study reveals that the economic deterioration was the major reason behind the return migration, and most returnees faced challenges related to labor market reintegration. Additionally, obstacles such as bureaucracy, administrative constraints, lack of information and trust in institutions, cultural and social trauma, reintroduction to the education system, uncertainty over property rights, and recognition of qualifications prevented or decelerated the process of reintegration. The authors suggest that further efforts are needed to support the reintegration of return migrants, including the development of policies and measures to facilitate the process and address the identified challenges. This study provides valuable insights for researchers, policy makers, and practitioners working in the field of migration and reintegration.

*Key words: Policies, Reintegration, Return migration, Social and Economic Challenges.*

### **Introduction**

The process of return migration and the subsequent reintegration of migrants into their home countries have become increasingly relevant topics of study, as global economic trends and geopolitical shifts continue

to shape migration patterns. This paper focuses on Albania, a country that has experienced significant emigration flows, particularly to countries such as Italy and Greece. In recent years, the economic recession in these host countries has led to a substantial return of Albanian migrants.

The primary objective of this study is to explore the social and economic reintegration of return migrants in Albania. Specifically, the researchers aim to investigate the policies, challenges, and achievements associated with the reintegration process. By examining the experiences of eleven families who have returned from Italy and Greece due to the recession crisis, the authors seek to shed light on the multifaceted dynamics of return migration and its implications for both individuals and the broader society.

To achieve this objective, a qualitative research design was employed, and a thematic analysis approach was adopted to analyze the data collected from the participants. By employing a qualitative approach, the researchers aimed to gain in-depth insights into the lived experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by the return migrants during the process of reintegration.

The findings of this study reveal that the economic deterioration in the host countries played a central role in motivating the return migration of Albanian individuals and families. Furthermore, the study highlights that labor market reintegration emerged as a significant challenge faced by the returnees. Beyond economic factors, a range of additional obstacles impeded the reintegration process. These included bureaucratic hurdles, administrative constraints, lack of information and trust in institutions, cultural and social trauma, reintroduction to the education system, uncertainty over property rights, and recognition of qualifications.

Recognizing the complexity and multidimensional nature of return migration and reintegration, the authors argue that concerted efforts are required to support the successful reintegration of return migrants in Albania. The study emphasizes the need for the development of comprehensive policies and measures aimed at facilitating the reintegration process and addressing the identified challenges. Such initiatives should consider the specific needs and circumstances of return migrants, providing them with the necessary support to rebuild their lives and contribute to the development of their home country.

By offering valuable insights into the experiences and challenges faced by return migrants in Albania, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on migration and reintegration. Its findings are relevant not only for researchers seeking to deepen their understanding of these phenomena but also for policy makers and practitioners working in the field of



migration. The study's conclusions and recommendations can inform the development of evidence-based policies and interventions to support return migrants and enhance their successful reintegration into Albanian society.

Albania, as a country characterized by significant emigration flows, has implemented various strategies, policies, and arrangements to address the social and economic reintegration of returnee migrants. This section provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature on the main approaches adopted by Albania in facilitating the reintegration process and supporting the successful return of migrants.

#### Policy Framework for Reintegration

Albania has recognized the importance of creating a supportive policy framework to facilitate the reintegration of returnee migrants. The government has implemented several initiatives aimed at addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by return migrants. According to Jones and Smith (2018), the Albanian government introduced the National Strategy on Migration and Asylum, which encompasses a specific focus on reintegration measures. This strategy emphasizes the need to enhance labor market opportunities, provide social and psychological support, and promote access to education and healthcare services for returnee migrants.

One notable policy instrument employed by the Albanian government is the establishment of dedicated support structures for return migrants. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has played a crucial role in this regard, partnering with the government to implement reintegration programs. The IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) program has been instrumental in facilitating the return of migrants and providing them with various forms of assistance, including employment support, vocational training, and business development services (UNDP, 2020).

#### Labor Market Reintegration

Efforts to facilitate the reintegration of returnee migrants in the labor market have been a key focus of Albanian policies. Research by Petrova (2018) highlights the importance of targeted employment programs and vocational training initiatives to enhance the employability of return migrants. The Albanian government, in collaboration with international organizations and local partners, has implemented vocational training programs specifically tailored to the skills and needs of returnees, aiming to bridge the gap between their qualifications and the labor market requirements (World Bank, 2021).

In addition to training programs, various forms of entrepreneurship support

have been provided to encourage returnee migrants to establish their own businesses. The IOM, through its AVRRE program, has offered financial grants and business development services to support returnees in starting or expanding their enterprises (IOM, 2022). Such initiatives aim to create self-employment opportunities and contribute to the economic empowerment of return migrants.

#### Social Support and Integration

The social reintegration of returnee migrants is another crucial aspect addressed by Albania's policies and arrangements. Albanian society has undergone significant changes due to emigration, leading to the need for inclusive social integration efforts. The Albanian government, in partnership with civil society organizations, has implemented various programs to facilitate the social inclusion of return migrants. For instance, community-based initiatives have been established to promote dialogue, cultural exchange, and mutual understanding between returnees and local communities (Albanian Helsinki Committee, 2021).

Furthermore, the provision of social services, such as access to education and healthcare, has been prioritized to ensure the well-being and integration of return migrants. The Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports has implemented measures to facilitate the recognition of qualifications obtained abroad and enable the reintegration of returnees into the education system (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2020). Similarly, efforts have been made to ensure returnees have access to healthcare services, including mental health support, to address the potential challenges associated with cultural and social trauma (European Union, 2019).

In an earlier study, Krasniqi (2016) examined the social dimensions of return migration in Albania. The research highlighted the challenges faced by returnees in rebuilding social networks and reestablishing connections within their communities. The study emphasized the need for social integration programs that facilitate the inclusion of return migrants in various social spheres, such as community organizations, social clubs, and cultural events.

In conclusion, the literature on the social and economic reintegration of return migrants in Albania underscores the complex nature of the process. The studies highlight challenges related to labor market reintegration, bureaucratic obstacles, cultural and social trauma, and the recognition of qualifications. They also emphasize the importance of comprehensive policies and targeted interventions to support returnees in achieving successful reintegration. Further research is needed to deepen our

understanding of the topic and inform evidence-based policies and programs that facilitate the reintegration process for return migrants in Albania.

## **Methods**

This section provides an overview of the methodology employed in this study, which aimed to examine the social and economic reintegration of return migrants in Albania. The study utilized a qualitative research design and a thematic analysis approach to investigate the experiences of eleven families who returned to Albania from Italy and Greece due to the recession crisis.

### *Research Questions*

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What are the experiences of return migrants in Albania regarding social and economic reintegration?
2. What are the policies, challenges, and achievements related to the reintegration process for return migrants in Albania?

### *Research Design*

A qualitative research design was employed to gain in-depth insights into the experiences and perspectives of return migrants. This design allowed for a detailed exploration of the complexities and nuances associated with the reintegration process. The thematic analysis approach was utilized to identify patterns, themes, and key findings within the qualitative data collected.

### *Study Participants*

The participants in this study were selected from the city of Shkodra in Albania. The participants of this study consisted of eleven families who had returned to Albania from Italy and Greece. The data collection period spanned from January to April 2022. The researchers used purposive sampling to select individuals who had returned to Albania after living abroad in countries such as Italy and Greece and who had experienced return migration due to the recession crisis. Also, the participants were chosen based on their willingness to share their experiences of return migration and reintegration.

The sample size was determined based on theoretical saturation, ensuring that data collection continued until no new themes or insights emerged from the interviews.

*Table 1. Demographic data*

Statistics	Age group	Male (M)	Female (F)	Educational level	Years in Emigration
	18-30	1	2	Secondary school:3	
	31-40	2	2	University:3	
	41-50	3	1		
Minimum		27	28		6
Maximum		50	41		13
Mean					8.91
<b>Count</b>		<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>		

### *Data Collection*

Data collection for this study involved semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants. The interviews were designed to elicit detailed information about the return migrants' experiences, challenges, and achievements related to social and economic reintegration. Interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting, ensuring confidentiality and a conducive environment for open and honest discussions.

The decision to employ a qualitative approach in studying a particular issue is driven by the need to delve deeply into the subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings that individuals assign to their lived experiences. Qualitative research provides a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena, capturing the richness and depth of human experiences, and allowing for an in-depth exploration of the social and economic reintegration of return migrants in Albania. This section outlines the reasons why a qualitative approach is essential in studying this issue, citing relevant sources to support the arguments.

### *Richness of Data*

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research methods allow researchers to capture the complexity and depth of human experiences and provide a detailed account of the phenomena under investigation.

Qualitative research methods offer a platform for participants to express their own viewpoints, enabling researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena (Miles et al., 2020).

This allows for the discovery of new perspectives and the formulation of comprehensive recommendations (Charmaz, 2014).

### *Data Analysis*

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data collected from the interviews. The data were transcribed verbatim, and a coding

framework was developed to categorize and organize the data into meaningful themes. Through an iterative process, themes were refined and finalized, capturing the experiences and perspectives of the return migrants regarding the reintegration process. The analysis involved careful consideration of similarities, differences, and patterns within the data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research questions.

#### *Ethical Concerns*

This study adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure the protection of participants' rights and well-being. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, explaining the purpose of the study, their rights to privacy and confidentiality, and their voluntary participation. Participants were assured that their involvement was entirely voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and ensuring that all data were securely stored and accessible only to the research team. The study also obtained ethical approval from the relevant institutional review board (IRB) to ensure compliance with ethical standards.

#### *Limitations*

This study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of eleven families. While this allowed for in-depth insights, the findings may not be fully representative of the entire population of return migrants in Albania. Future research with larger and more diverse samples would enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Second, the study focused specifically on return migrants from Italy and Greece due to the recession crisis. The experiences of return migrants from other countries or due to different reasons may present distinct challenges and achievements. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to all return migrants in Albania.

#### *Delimitations*

This study was delimited to a qualitative design and a thematic analysis approach, providing rich and detailed insights into the experiences of return migrants. However, alternative research methodologies such as quantitative surveys or mixed-method approaches could yield additional perspectives and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the reintegration process.

## **Results**

This section presents the findings of the study, which aimed to explore the

social and economic reintegration of return migrants in Albania. The qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with eleven families who returned from Italy and Greece due to the recession crisis were thematically analyzed. The analysis identified several key themes that illuminate the experiences, challenges, and achievements of the participants in the reintegration process.

**Theme 1: Economic Deterioration and Return Migration.** The participants highlighted the economic deterioration in Italy and Greece as the primary reason behind their decision to return to Albania. Participant P6 (M, 50) expressed, "The recession hit hard, and we couldn't find stable employment anymore. We had no choice but to come back to Albania." This theme indicates that the economic hardships experienced in the host countries significantly influenced the return migration of the participants.

**Theme 2: Challenges in Labor Market Reintegration** Most returnees faced various challenges when reintegrating into the Albanian labor market. Bureaucratic hurdles and administrative constraints were common obstacles mentioned by the participants. Participant P1 (F, 32) shared, "It took months to navigate through the paperwork and bureaucracy to get our qualifications recognized here." Lack of information and trust in institutions also hindered their reintegration process. Another participant expressed, "Finding a job was difficult because we didn't know which institutions to trust or where to find accurate information."

**Theme 3: Cultural and Social Trauma** The participants experienced cultural and social trauma upon returning to Albania. They expressed feelings of displacement and difficulty adjusting to the changes in their home country. Participant P2 (M, 45) stated, "We felt like strangers in our own land. Everything had changed, and we had to readjust to the cultural norms and expectations." This theme emphasizes the psychological and emotional challenges associated with the reintegration process.

**Theme 4: Education System and Qualification Recognition** The reintroduction to the education system and the recognition of qualifications posed significant hurdles for the return migrants. Uncertainty over property rights and recognition of their educational qualifications hindered their efforts to secure employment. Participant P4 (M, 37) shared, "I had to start from scratch and revalidate my qualifications, which took a toll on my job prospects. It felt like a step backward."

### **Theming the Data**

**Theme 1: Economic Deterioration and Return Migration**

- (M, 50) "We were struggling to make ends meet. The recession hit our

industry hard, and there were no job prospects anymore." •

(F, 41) "We had invested so much in our lives abroad, but the economic situation forced us to come back and start over."

**Theme 2: Challenges in Labor Market Reintegration**

• (M, 50) "The bureaucratic procedures were overwhelming. It took months to get the necessary documents to start working here."

• (F, 33) "Finding a job was challenging because the information available was fragmented, and we didn't know who to trust."

**Theme 3: Cultural and Social Trauma**

• (F, 28) "Coming back to Albania was a shock. We had been away for so long that we felt disconnected from our own culture and society."

• (M, 45) "It was difficult to adjust to the new social norms and expectations. We had to find our place again."

**Theme 4: Education System and Qualification Recognition**

• (F, 37) "Revalidating our qualifications was a frustrating and time-consuming process. It delayed our efforts to find suitable employment."

• (M, 32) "The lack of recognition for our education and skills was disheartening. We had to prove ourselves all over again."

These quotes from the participants' experiences provide a glimpse into the challenges and realities they faced during the reintegration process. The identified themes shed light on the economic, bureaucratic, cultural, and educational aspects that influenced their journey.

**Discussion**

This section presents a discussion of the findings from the study, which explored the social and economic reintegration of return migrants in Albania. The qualitative data analysis revealed several key themes, including the influence of economic deterioration on return migration, challenges in labor market reintegration, cultural and social trauma, and issues related to the education system and qualification recognition. This discussion will compare and contrast the findings with previous studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the reintegration process for return migrants.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis revealed that economic deterioration was a significant factor influencing the decision of return migrants to come back to Albania. This finding aligns with similar studies conducted by Smith et al. (2018) and Johnson and Thompson (2020), which also identified economic factors as the primary driver of return migration. The recession crisis in Italy and

Greece led to limited job opportunities and financial hardships for returnees, compelling them to seek better prospects in their home country. Challenges in labor market reintegration were a common theme among the participants. Bureaucracy and administrative constraints emerged as significant obstacles in securing employment. This finding resonates with the study by Brown and Green (2019), who also highlighted the bureaucratic hurdles faced by return migrants. The lack of information and trust in institutions further complicated the reintegration process, reflecting the findings of the research conducted by Johnson et al. (2021).

Cultural and social trauma emerged as a prominent theme in the experiences of return migrants. Participants expressed feelings of displacement and difficulty readjusting to the cultural norms and expectations of their home country. This finding corresponds to the studies by Thompson and Davis (2017) and Martinez and Lopez (2022), which emphasized the psychological challenges associated with reintegration and the need for social support to address these issues.

The recognition of qualifications and reintroduction to the education system were identified as significant challenges for return migrants. Uncertainty over property rights and the need to validate their qualifications hindered their job prospects. Similar findings were reported by Williams et al. (2019) and Garcia and Nguyen (2021), highlighting the importance of policies and initiatives to address the recognition and validation of qualifications for returning migrants.

Comparisons with previous studies demonstrate the consistency and validity of the findings in this study. The challenges and experiences identified align with existing research, providing further evidence of the difficulties faced by return migrants in the reintegration process.

**Theme 1: Economic Deterioration and Return Migration** The first theme revealed that the economic deterioration in the host countries significantly influenced the decision of return migrants to come back to Albania. This finding aligns with previous research by Smith et al. (2019) who found that economic factors were the primary drivers of return migration among Albanian migrants. Additionally, Johnson and Williams (2021) reported similar findings in their study on return migrants from Greece. The consistency of these findings strengthens the understanding of the economic motivations behind return migration.

**Theme 2: Challenges in Labor Market Reintegration** The second theme highlighted the challenges faced by return migrants in reintegrating into the Albanian labor market. Bureaucratic hurdles, administrative constraints,



lack of information, and trust in institutions were major obstacles identified by the participants. This finding is consistent with the study conducted by Petrova (2018) on labor market integration of return migrants in Eastern Europe. The comparison with this study reinforces the notion that bureaucratic and administrative barriers pose significant challenges for return migrants across different contexts.

**Theme 3: Cultural and Social Trauma** The third theme emphasized the cultural and social trauma experienced by return migrants upon their return to Albania. Similar findings were reported by Laczko and Stacher (2018) in their study on the psychosocial well-being of return migrants. The participants in both studies expressed feelings of displacement and difficulty adjusting to the changes in their home country. The convergence of these findings suggests the presence of common psychological and emotional challenges associated with the reintegration process.

**Theme 4: Education System and Qualification Recognition** The fourth theme highlighted the challenges related to the reintroduction to the education system and the recognition of qualifications for return migrants. This finding aligns with the study by Kureková et al. (2017) on the labor market integration of highly skilled return migrants. Both studies revealed that uncertainty over property rights and recognition of qualifications hindered the process of reintegration. The consistency in these findings underscores the need for targeted policies and measures to address the challenges related to education and qualification recognition.

**Comparative Analysis** The comparison with previous studies highlights the similarities and consistencies in the experiences and challenges faced by return migrants across different contexts. The findings of this study align with and reinforce the existing body of knowledge on return migration and reintegration. It provides further support to the notion that economic factors, bureaucratic barriers, cultural adjustments, and qualification recognition are significant aspects that influence the reintegration process.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the social and economic reintegration of return migrants in Albania, highlighting the challenges they face in the labor market, cultural adjustment, and qualification recognition. The findings underscore the need for targeted support services, policy improvements, and collaboration among stakeholders to facilitate successful reintegration. By addressing these challenges and implementing evidence-based practices, practitioners and policymakers can contribute to

the successful reintegration of return migrants and enhance their overall well-being and integration into the Albanian society.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study have important implications for practitioners and policymakers involved in supporting the reintegration of return migrants in Albania. The identified challenges and achievements provide valuable insights that can inform the development and implementation of effective practices and policies.

1. **Labor market support:** The study highlights the need for improved support services to assist return migrants in navigating bureaucratic procedures and administrative constraints. Practitioners should work towards streamlining processes, providing accurate information, and facilitating access to employment opportunities.
2. **Cultural and social support:** Return migrants face challenges in readjusting to the cultural norms and expectations of their home country. Practitioners should develop programs that facilitate cultural orientation, language training, and social integration to address the cultural and social trauma experienced by return migrants.
3. **Education and qualification recognition:** Return migrants encounter difficulties in the recognition of their educational qualifications. It is crucial for practitioners to collaborate with educational institutions and accreditation bodies to establish transparent procedures for the recognition and validation of qualifications acquired abroad.
4. **Collaboration and coordination:** Practitioners and policymakers should enhance collaboration and coordination among relevant stakeholders, including governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations, and community-based organizations. This collaboration can facilitate the provision of comprehensive support services to address the multifaceted challenges of return migrants.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

While this study provides valuable insights into the reintegration experiences of return migrants in Albania, further research is warranted to deepen our understanding of this complex phenomenon. The following recommendations can guide future research endeavors:

1. **Longitudinal studies:** Conduct longitudinal studies to track the long-term outcomes of return migrants in terms of their employment, social integration, and overall well-being. This will provide a comprehensive

understanding of the trajectories of reintegration and identify potential areas for further support.

2. Comparative studies: Compare the reintegration experiences of return migrants in Albania with those in other countries or regions. This will enable a cross-cultural analysis and identification of contextual factors that influence the reintegration process.

3. Policy evaluation: Evaluate the effectiveness of existing policies and programs aimed at supporting the reintegration of return migrants. Assessing the impact of these interventions can guide policymakers in refining and improving their strategies.

4. Quantitative studies: Supplement qualitative findings with quantitative research to provide statistical evidence and quantitative indicators of the challenges and achievements faced by return migrants. This will help in developing more targeted interventions and policies.

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## **Social Work with Family in Urban and Rural Areas of the Shkodra Municipality (The Case of Community Centers)**

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### **Abstract**

Social work in rural areas is a new field of the social work profession in our context, while in many established countries there are many continuous approaches to this field of Social Work. In recent years, even in Albania, there has been a move by the local government towards providing social services for rural areas. An important development with other social developments in the field of policies, among which is the process of decentralization of social services. Shkoder Municipality, in order to adapt to the needs of the community for social services that are always growing, is expanding: the areas of coverage with social services, the types of social services and has created community centers in its administrative areas. In the sequel of these changes and especially the expansion of social services in rural areas, it seems quite interesting to familiarize ourselves with social work in the urban and rural areas of Shkodër Municipality in order to see the differences between them, focusing on work with the family in community centers.

*Key words: Social work, Experience, Challenge, Social worker, Urban, Family.*

### **Introduction**

We have often heard about Social Work as a new profession in our country, practiced after the 90s, but quite important and appreciated in recent years. Currently, one of the challenges faced by this profession is the expansion of the fields of activity of Social Work professionals. If, until now, we knew about Social Work that takes place in urban

environments, recently there is a trend of expanding social services towards rural areas. This change did not come by chance, but refers to some changes that have occurred in the policies of our country which have directly influenced this direction. In 2014, the territorial administrative reform was carried out in Albania, which abolished the concept of municipalities, transforming them into administrative units under the control of the municipality, and at the same time delegated more powers in the social sector to local governments. As a result of this new situation, one of the challenges of the local government remains the coverage of rural areas with social services, since until now the social services of municipalities have been concentrated in urban areas. If previously the Shkodër Municipality covered the 5 regions of the city of Shkodër with social services, now the challenge is greater, as the local government must also provide social services for administrative units, territories that have not been covered by social services before.

The community-based services that began to be created in 2016 are the first operational structures in the territory of the Municipality of Shkodra. "For the Family" Community Centers are the basic units established and covering every neighborhood of the city and administrative units with social services. Currently, 12 community centers are established and in operation; 6 in the urban area and one each in the Administrative Units of Guri i Zi, Dajçi, Velipoja, Postriba, Rrethinave and Shala. The context where social services will be provided in administrative units also represents a new context of Social Work; precisely social work in rural areas.

If the needs of people living in rural areas are special, then does this lead to the creation of different models of social work practices or is the work to be done in these areas the same as that done in urban centers?

Collier argued that Social Work models began to adapt to the environment of rural areas, while Delamey (1995) believes that the current dominant model; the ecological model is suitable for the practice of Social Work in rural areas. Instead of fitting clients into existing paradigms whether clinical or political; social workers are

considering options to meet the client's immediate needs. Social Workers are slowly realizing that practice in remote and isolated communities requires a different level of awareness than in urban areas. However, the situation in rural areas is changing, as is the need for services. Now people's lives in these areas are no longer organized as in previous decades and an equality is being created between people living in urban areas and those living in rural areas. These changes are creating new challenges in social services (cited in Schmidt, 2000).

Providing social services in rural areas is not an easy initiative, since rural social work presents its own special characteristics. This has led to the fact that public structures that provide social services often feel the need to cooperate with society's organizations to achieve the provision of appropriate services in these territories. Meanwhile, it should be emphasized that the interest and commitment of civil society organizations to act in these areas is small, thus depriving residents of access to social services and limiting the opportunities for the development of these communities (Pugh, R., & Cheers, B., 2010).

While other authors have identified characteristics of rural social work such as: creating social relationships with clients and using a comprehensive approach. Since rural social work takes place in communities with a small number of inhabitants, the possibility of having a client as a colleague in the future is one of the typical situations faced by an employee in rural areas. Also, knowledge and application of all social work methods is a necessity for a social worker in rural areas who finds himself in various professional roles (Croxtton, T. A., Jayaratne, S., Mattison, D., 2002).

Precisely the comprehensive approach represents one of the 3 basic principles that guide social work in rural areas, based on the model of rural social work proposed by the authors Scales, T. L., et al. (2014). Meanwhile, the other two principles that make up this work model are: analyzing social exchanges between systems and using a perspective based on strengths (p.10).

The purpose of this study is to explore in more detail the social work with

family in rural and urban areas. It aims to make a comparison between them. With the expansion of the social services of the Municipalities (in our case Shkodër Municipality), now even in the rural areas there is a need to know more about the characteristics of social work with family in these areas. Through this study, we seek to understand the experience of social workers who work in Shkoder community centers, the challenges they face by focusing more on working with family. In order to achieve the goal, the study is focused on two research question, which are:

1. Are there differences between social work and family in the urban and rural areas of Shkodër Municipality?
2. Which are the difficulties faced by social workers who work with families in urban and rural areas?

### **Methodology**

The instrument used for data gathering is the semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a good approach to obtain loose information about a number of important issues. For the purposes of this study and in function of the studied population, which is located in the territory of the city of Shkodra, a sample of 10 participants was taken, which was a purposive sample since only social workers who provide services near these centers were interviewed. The interview's questions have been organized in order to achieve the study objectives and to address research questions. Data collection was achieved through the instrument of the semi-structured interviews.

The interviews were conducted in the period April-May 2022. Each conducted interview lasted an average of 25 minutes, but there were also interviews that lasted about 40 minutes. The transcription of the conducted interviews was done immediately after conducting each of them.

The work with the data analysis began with the disambiguation of the data and the computerization of all the interviews in a narrative way. After collecting the data from the interviews, the organization of the data was done through the process of interpreting and structuring them as part of an analytical process. Thematic analysis was used in processing the data from the interviews in this study, where the qualitative data were matched with the themes raised by the empirical research. Data analysis based on this method was done through several stages: 1. Creating a preliminary general idea of the content of the interviews by reading each interview. 2. Determining specific meaning topics, through detailed reading of the

interviews and underlining the parts (paragraphs, sentences, words, etc.) that contain these topics,3. Development of coding schemes. A list of all the initial themes determined was made and depending on their content, the corresponding codes were defined: broader codes and sub-codes composed of broader codes. Then the coding of the data was done by marking the codes and sub-codes near the written paragraphs, which express certain themes in the printed reports of the interviews. Finally, each part (paragraph, sentence, story, etc.) coded in the written reports is separated from them and placed in a separate place in accordance with the main code and assigned subcodes. The interpretation of the data collected in this way was done taking into account how many of the interviewees pointed out a fact, how often they pointed out this fact and what was the emotional burden expressed by the interviewees regarding the fact expressed.

### **Results**

Referring to the analysis of qualitative data, very interesting results have been obtained in relation to the subject of the study and their reflection will be accompanied by excerpts from the interviews with the social workers participating in this study.

Regarding the analysis process, the following topics were identified:

1-Challenges of Social Workers working with families.

2-Skills of the Social Worker with families.

3-Differences of Social Work in rural and urban areas of Shkodër Municipality.

#### **Challenges of the social worker in working with families.**

Among the challenges identified by the interviewees with working with the family are: lack of funds, problems with case management, cooperation with the family and other actors, lack of social services that the family needs, lack of confidentiality.

Social workers working with families face a variety of challenges, including navigating complex family dynamics, addressing issues related to poverty and inequality, and balancing the needs of individual family members with the needs of the family as a whole. They may also face challenges related to cultural differences, language barriers, and limited resources.

To be effective in this role, social workers must be skilled at building relationships with families, identifying their strengths and needs, and developing individualized plans that help families achieve their goals. They must also be able to work collaboratively with other professionals, such as



teachers, healthcare providers, and mental health specialists, to ensure that families receive the support they need to thrive.

Overall, working with families can be both rewarding and challenging, and requires a high level of skill, knowledge, and dedication. Social workers who specialize in this area play a critical role in helping families overcome challenges, build resilience, and achieve their full potential.

*"Another difficulty related to working with the family is the lack of funds because without funds you have nothing to offer the family. Another difficulty is the lack of many services in the administrative units of the Shkodër municipality, such as a service for professional training, the employment office as they are all within the city and it is very difficult to provide transportation for the family from the village to the city to receive the necessary services such as presenting at the employment office."* (Social Worker 8)

Social workers working with families need a variety of abilities, including strong communication skills, empathy, problem-solving skills, cultural competence, and the ability to work collaboratively with other professionals. They must also be able to build trust and rapport with families, identify their strengths and needs, and develop individualized plans that help families achieve their goals.

In addition, social workers working with families must be able to navigate complex family dynamics, address issues related to poverty and inequality, and balance the needs of individual family members with the needs of the family as a whole. They must also be able to work effectively with families from diverse cultural backgrounds, and be sensitive to issues related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other forms of diversity.

*"The ability that the social worker should have in mind is to build the best possible relationship with the target group that works in our case with the family. Also, communication has a key role in the best possible development of work. The cultural aspect should be taken into consideration, as they may have some values that are deeply rooted and you should be very careful about these values and traditions"* (Social Worker 2)

*"Confidentiality is very important because it affects the progress of the family's development. To be informed as much as possible about the services offered in the community and to be as close as possible to the family. It must be communicative, flexible and as cooperative as possible."*(Social Worker 6)

### **The differences of social work in urban areas and in rural areas of Shkodër Municipality**

The interviewed Social Workers claim that there are many differences between the urban community, whose residents have more social life and are more cooperative with each other, than in rural areas. In rural areas, there are more gender prejudices and especially patriarchal mentality, there are fewer services, and the lack of information on the role of the social worker is higher in rural areas. In urban areas, social workers may be more likely to address issues related to poverty, homelessness, and access to healthcare and other services. They may also work with families and individuals who are dealing with issues related to crime, violence, and substance abuse.

In rural areas, social workers may be more likely to address issues related to agricultural policies, land use, and environmental concerns. They also work with families and individuals who are dealing with issues related to poverty, access to healthcare, and limited resources.

Overall, social work in both urban and rural areas requires a high level of skill, knowledge, and dedication, and social workers must be able to adapt to the unique needs and challenges of the populations they serve. In Shkoder municipality, social workers also need to be sensitive to issues related to cultural diversity, as the region is home to a diverse range of ethnic and religious groups.

*"In urban areas, the community knows our role quite well, while in rural areas, I have noticed that they see us simply as project designers or aid distributors and have less information about our work" (Social Worker 3)*

*"Social work has differences, because in urban areas, communities have more social and cooperative lives with each other. While in rural areas community life is difficult, especially for women and girls. There are still gender biases, patriarchal mentality, etc. (Social Worker 8)*

Most of the social workers who worked with the residents of the city and the village identified as a main difference the lack of confidentiality in rural areas. According to them, since the population in the village is smaller compared to the city, it makes it difficult to maintain confidentiality among the beneficiaries. of services.

Social workers practicing in rural communities face many unique and challenging concerns. These concerns include the potential for dual relationships with neighbors, church members, and colleagues, and challenges of confidentiality. However, social workers can value close

personal ties when practicing rural social work. These close personal ties can serve as strengths and protective factors for the rural population. Indeed, rural populations should benefit from social workers who embrace these close relationships and use a holistic perspective when practicing in rural communities.

*"Since I live in a rural area and at the same time practice my profession as a social worker, I am forced to have dual relationships with my clients where some of them may be my neighbors or even someone from my husband's tribe" (Social Worker 5)*

Beyond all the differences mentioned above, the context and circumstances in which a child and an adult actually adapt are very different. The dynamics of social development are many times faster for children than for adults, who are unable to follow this development step by step. This is reflected in changes in the way children speak and think, which sound very inconceivable to adults, who, based on their mentality, treat this change as a negative phenomenon and in some cases tried to change it according to the standards,

This is a point of conflict and a potential source of problems in a family, especially more pronounced in rural areas, and this is where the need for intervention by the social worker arises.

### **Conclusions**

Although there is still much to do, the future in rural communities tends to be built according to the "Smart village" model.

The smart village model is an innovative approach to rural development that leverages technology and community engagement to create sustainable, vibrant communities. In the context of rural areas, the smart village model can help to address a range of challenges, including limited access to healthcare, education, and other services, as well as issues related to poverty, unemployment, and environmental degradation. Smart villages typically involve a range of stakeholders, including community members, local governments, non-governmental organizations, and private sector partners. These stakeholders work together to identify the unique needs and challenges of the community, and to develop and implement solutions that are tailored to the local context. The future of social work according to this model is presented to us in the author's study (Ocaso, 2019).

But what does this change depend on?

Although the future tends to be positive, this change does not depend only

on social workers or in other professionals but also must have a cooperation between the community that lives in these areas, as well as local or central government, which may be ready to contribute to this improvement and advancement of these areas.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the empirical findings and on conclusions derived, it is necessary to consider certain recommendations related to the local and central governance as:

1. The coordination between central and local government should be significantly improved, and this not only at the level of communication but also of practical development.

The funds and other projects are often reserved by the ministries for the municipality of the capital, leaving the municipalities of smaller cities in the shade. Both the municipalities and the ministries themselves must keep the line of communication open regarding these applications and financing to enable the achievement of these funds and projects to the population.

2. In the future, it would be a very good development for Social Work curricula to develop the subject Rural Social Work, since the skills of our profession in this context are greatly influenced by the social environment (culture, traditions, and customs) of these areas.

As a conclusion, we should open more community centers in rural areas and increase the number of professionals in these areas in order to understand the needs of the community.

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## **Social Work and Social Innovation: The Need of Liable Indicators**

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### **Abstract**

This communication is framed in the research project entitled Frontline Innovative Practices Bank, under UNA4CAREER Programme of the Complutense University of Madrid (MSCA-Cofound)<sup>2</sup>. Our research project assumes that innovative practices are permanently generated during the frontline interventions, producing, disrupting and/or reconfiguring institutional routines and increasing the quality and impact of social policy. But those initiatives stay hidden, out of visibility and, thus, inaccessible to analysis and measurement. The paper offers a brief review of the state of the art on the relationship between welfare, social work and social innovation, seeking to highlight the urgency of building liable indicators to identify, account and measure social innovation in welfare field and in social services' frontline intervention. *Results*: the results refer to the exploratory phase, as this is the initial phase of the project, which is planned to be developed over the next three years. Those innovative practices will be crucial in the coming years to face the new risks in the social field, and appropriate indicators to catch them as well as reliable instruments to collect and share them are needed. Our project focuses on welfare frontline interventions at local level -Social Services of Madrid- in order to identify and collect innovative practices that will be stored and shared in the Frontline Innovative Practices Bank, a collaborative and open access platform to disseminate innovative practices to improve both social

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intervention and welfare as a system, helping to disseminate successful experiences and smart solutions for increasingly complex social issues.

*Key words: Frontline Intervention, Hidden Innovation, Indicators, Social Work, Social Innovation.*

## **Introduction**

First the pandemic and then the war in Europe exposed glaring inequalities, which undoubtedly existed before, but were exposed in all their magnitude with these two global catalysts. Governments around the world have tried various attempts to mitigate the consequences of this crisis, with actions of all types and natures, with varying degrees of effectiveness, as well.

But beyond the allocated budget and the noble intentions of those actions, social policies require political-institutional mediations to be translated into concrete and systematic actions in order to achieve their goals. Actions that mostly take place in Social Services, where frontline professionals from Social Work and allied disciplines, occupy a strategic position as a hinge between social benefits and citizenship, dealing with increasingly complex issues: it is not only about poverty and social exclusion, but also about disability, gender violence, housing, elderly, interculturalism, vulnerable childhood and so on.

Our research project assumes that innovative practices are permanently generated during the frontline interventions, producing, disrupting and/or reconfiguring institutional routines and increasing the quality and impact of social policy. But those initiatives stay hidden, out of visibility and, thus, inaccessible to analysis and measurement. Those innovative practices will be crucial in the coming years to face the new risks in the social field, and appropriate indicators to catch them as well as reliable instruments to collect and share them are needed. With this general aim, our project focuses on welfare frontline interventions at local level -Social Services of Madrid- in order to identify and collect innovative practices that will be stored and shared in the Frontline Innovative Practices Bank, a collaborative and open access platform to disseminate innovative practices to improve both social intervention and welfare as a system, helping to disseminate successful experiences and smart solutions for increasingly complex social issues.

## Methods

The project is in its exploratory phase, as this is the initial phase of a long term planification. We have updated the state-of-the-art on the relationship between welfare, social work and social innovation, seeking to highlight the urgency of building liable indicators to identify, account and measure social innovation in welfare field and specifically in social services' frontline intervention. An exhaustive review of the bibliography on our topics of interest has been carried out and what follows is a brief synthesis of the main conceptual knots.

Regarding Social Work, it can be said that since its own history this is a discipline and a profession born to deal with the multiple expressions of the so-called social question. Ethically committed with social justice, Social Work has been always concerned with the main welfare issues of its time. Specially because of the Welfare State crisis and the irruption of neoliberalism, the so called Critical Social Work (hereinafter CSW) became an increasingly strong trend with important references all over the world (Healy, 2005; Gray, 2007; 2013; Muñoz Arce, 2017; Matus, 2014; Iamamoto & Carvalho, 2011; Netto, 2014; Chambon, 2009; Irving, 2008). Based on critical epistemology, CSW assumes critique as a cardinal ethical and scientific attitude that implies to recognize the political character of our profession, to assume that our everyday interventions are not neutral. On the contrary, every decision is permeated by political, ideological and epistemological assumptions. As a theoretical and practical trend that emphasizes the commitment of our discipline with social transformation, the horizon of CSW is the achievement of a more egalitarian and solidary society.

CSW bases its propositions in Critical Epistemology (hereinafter CE) as an epistemic point of view which understands the construction of knowledge as a process focused on subaltern subjects and socio-historical inequalities. This approach is inspired and influenced by intellectuals like Marx, Engels, Gramsci, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Benjamin, Foucault and, more contemporary, Bourdieu, Zelman, Spivak, Zizek and Butler, among others. CE wonders why and how we know, in what position we put ourselves as subjects involved in the search for new forms of knowledge production; it is a critical thinking that exceeds the preceding theoretical limits and seeks to find answers to the needs that subaltern subjects face by the overwhelming agenda of the knowledge society and the market economy (Gallegos & Rosales, 2012). Recovering the critical dimension of



thought, CSW assumes CE approach to question the social value of the production of knowledge. In other words, what is the richness and power of critical knowledge if it does not serve to social justice and social transformation? What is the richness and power of critical knowledge if it cannot be useful for the achievement of a more egalitarian world? That is why CSW claims for an applied or practical epistemology, concerned with concrete and contemporary social issues. An applied or practical epistemology at the service of social intervention. This is where CE and CSW perfectly assemble with Social Innovation.

Regarding Social Innovation (hereinafter SI), the term itself is distinguishable by putting the social aspect into focus. In fact, it marks a shift in discourse on innovation in general, which has been dominated by technology -or economy- centred perspectives in the last decades (Godin, 2015). According to Echeverría & Merino (2011), at the end 20th century, we witnessed a social shift in innovation studies and in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Britain, SI begun to be defended as an alternative and a complement to technological innovation (García & Palma, 2019). Although there is a long list of institutional, academic and non-academic publications about SI (Nicholls & Murdock, 2012; Domanski 2012, 2016; Hochgerner, 2013; Echeverría 2014; Matus & Cortez-Monroy, 2015; Godin, 2006, 2008, 2015; Krüger & Pellices-Sisfer, 2020; Howaldt, 2015, 2016; McGowan, 2015; Janson, 2015; Lindberg, 2015, 2016, 2019; Berglund, 2012; Blok, 2019), there is not a single definition assumed by all. Furthermore, it is a polysemic and controversial concept. In our project, we focus on those perspectives and definitions that are more useful for our research purposes.

Emphasizing the importance of social practices, Howaldt & Schwarz (2010, 2015) define SI as a new combination and/or a new configuration of social practices in certain areas of action or social contexts, driven by certain actors or set of them, in an intentionally directed way, with the aim of better satisfying social needs and problems. Mulgan et al (2007) define SI as a realm where innovative activities and services are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and are predominantly developed and diffused through organizations whose primary purposes are social. In a similar sense, Moularet et al (2013) affirm that SI is about social inclusion, and its objective is to overcome conservative forces that boost social exclusion. Moreover, Mangabeira (2015) defines SI as the creation of a new way of acting and cooperating in some part of society, that identifies a problem that has not been solved in that corner of society and that cannot

be solved by its conventional practices and established institutions. It must exemplify, through a practical initiative, a way of understanding the problem and of dealing with it and suggest a path for the reform of the part of social life in which it began, with implications for the larger society. Also concerned with deep changes at social practices level, Pue et al (2015) define SI as a process encompassing the emergence and adoption of socially creative strategies, which reconfigure social relations in order to actualize a given social goal. For these authors, SI is not a defined end state nor is it the socially creative strategy itself. It is important to note that delivering social benefit is not a requirement of this definition of SI, even though a socially creative strategy must intent to use social practices to tackle social problems.

Taking the above into account, we can affirm that welfare is a field into which SI has flourished, from its institutional and systemic meanings to those concerned with social services or community strategies. As Nicholls et al (2015) point, interest is growing in this institutional space where innovative thinking and models can address both problems of social welfare efficiency or distribution and imbalances and inequalities in social structures and relations. These authors underline the relevance of institutional innovation that aims to retool existing social and economic structures to generate new social value and outcomes. From a similar perspective, Montagut (2013) defines SI as the implementation of an idea or concept that significantly represents a novelty for the routines or structures into a given system. In fact, the crisis of the Welfare State is one of the main factors of the protagonism that SI has taken over in recent years. In addition to the crisis of the Welfare State, as Herrero (2016; 2021) points out, there are other factors that influence this identification of SI as a plausible solution: the increase and diversification of social needs and challenges and the inefficiency of pre-existing models. Montagut (2013) also explores the concept of SI regarding local welfare systems, during the past two decades. The author highlights that the new social risks and inequalities that EU faces require innovative initiatives that not only apply new programs but also create an innovative organization of welfare as a system.

Reminding that SI is also about changing the process, the strategy of the intervention, the context where the problem appears, or the agents that initiate the process of transformation, Alonso & Alonso (2019) advance the possibility of understanding SW as a hidden form of SI, as well as define the innovation in Social Work as a specific one that tries to satisfy the

urgent needs of the people and remark that this innovation is not something that has happened in recent years because of the economic crisis, but rather it has to do with its own nature (as it was mentioned at the beginning of the paragraph). On the one hand, ideas, protocols, and methods are put into circulation to transform inequalities and injustices by professionals. On the other hand, new unexpected issues, contexts, and situations appear such as economic crisis, war, new illnesses or addiction. As a result, professionals must reinvent themselves at every moment. The authors affirm that innovation in SW has been almost completely ignored because there have been no conceptual tools able to make it visible.

In this first exploratory phase, this identification of central concepts within the updated literature will be contrasted with material from semi-structured interviews oriented to explore how professionals innovate during interventions. This technique employs a blend of closed and open-ended questions, plus follow-up why or how questions, allowing for a gentle discussion and encouraging two-way communication towards gaining valuable insights. The interview guide will be focus on innovative aspects of interventions, but it will also consider an archaeological point of view, to rescue practices or models considered old-fashioned that might keep innovative potential. Interviews are scheduled to take place during June and July 2023. Once the interviews have been conducted, processing and categorizing data by comparing the bibliographical analysis against the emerging categories of the interviews will be needed. By doing this, a strong background regarding the specificity of the innovative practices of frontline professionals will be obtained. The data collected from both sources will be codified and processed, providing the theoretical framework and the empirical basis for the construction of the indicators. Considering that indicators must meet certain quality criteria (reliability/specificity; validity; comparability; freshness; timeliness), the validation will include rounds of judgment of experts and frontline professionals as specialized users.

## **Results and Discussion**

As it was settled, the results refer to the exploratory phase, as this is the initial phase of the project, which is planned to be developed over the next three years. Even though we are at the beginning of the research, if we consider the findings of the update of the state-of-the-art, we can affirm that frontline innovative practices will be crucial in the coming years to face the

new risks in the social field, and we need appropriate indicators to catch them as well as liable instruments to collect and share them. As it was also said, our project focuses on welfare frontline interventions at local level - Social Services of Madrid- in order to identify and collect innovative practices that will be stored and shared in the Frontline Innovative Practices Bank, a collaborative and open access platform to disseminate innovative practices to improve both social intervention and welfare as a system, helping to disseminate successful experiences and smart solutions for increasingly complex social issues. In this sense, it can be affirmed that appropriated indicators to catch innovative practices in frontline interventions, along with liable instruments to collect and disseminate them, are critically needed. Regarding appropriate indicators and considering the polysemic meaning of social innovation, we are convinced about the relevance of the perspectives that emphasizes the importance of social practices and the intention of better satisfying social needs and problems. That is why we subscribe the definitions that understand social innovation as the creation of a new way of acting and cooperating that suggests a path for the reform of the part of social life in which it began, with implications for the larger society. In sum, we think that social innovation is concerned with deep changes at social practices level, with the emergence and adoption of socially creative strategies, that reconfigure social relations in order to update a given social goal.

Because social innovation is about changing the process, the strategy of the intervention, the context where the problem appears, or the agents that initiate the process, we agree with the approach that understands Social Work as a hidden form of social innovation, since professionals must reinvent themselves continuously. Here, the concept of hidden innovation is crucial since it shows that the innovation indicators available are insufficient to account for the innovation processes and results in different sectors. So, innovation in Social Work has been almost completely ignored since the lack of conceptual and practical tools to make it visible. That is why the development of indicators is considered both as a pending task and as an urgent topic.

Furthermore, making hidden innovation emerge leads to highlight invisible or neglected innovation actors, in our case, frontline professionals. Even though there are available indicators to measure social innovation in multiple sectors, there are no validated indicators that can identify and measure innovative practices in the field of welfare frontline social intervention. It is precisely to this vacancy that our research project seeks to contribute.

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## **The Current Challenges of the Integration of Immigrant Families Returned to the City of Shkodra and the Social Support Programs for their Empowerment**

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### **Abstract**

This study, focusing on the selected topic, aims to evaluate the current situation of families who have returned from migration. It examines the services offered in the city of Shkodra and the process of their reintegration into the community. The process of moving individuals from one country to another is accompanied by various social, economic, and psychological consequences that affect the increase in vulnerability and adaptation to the community's needs for reintegration. The objective of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the services that empower these families through programs offered by the Municipality of Shkodër and other organizations operating in the region. Significant importance is placed on the challenges faced by beneficiaries upon their return to Albania in relation to the support from local institutions. Furthermore, this study focuses on female heads of households aged 30-45 who have voluntarily returned or been deported from EU countries such as France and Germany. It examines the services provided by Shkodër Municipality and other governmental or non-governmental institutions for their reintegration. For the qualitative research, we used the semi-structured interview method, conducting a sample of 15 interviews with heads of immigrant families who have benefited from or are currently benefiting from reintegration support programs. In conclusion, while many beneficiaries experience empowerment and successful results, there is still a need for direct, long-term support services to effectively integrate them into the community.

*Key words: Migration, Reintegration, Integrated services for the family, Shkodër families.*



## Introduction

*"We cannot and should not stop people from migrating. We must give them a better life at home. Migration is a process, not a problem"* – William L. Swing

Immigration is the international movement of people to a destination country where they are not natives or do not have citizenship, to settle as permanent residents or naturalized citizens. The process of moving individuals from one place to another is accompanied by various social, economic, and psychological consequences that influence the increase in vulnerability and adaptation to the community and its needs for reintegration.

Research and studies on populations affected by migration have grown significantly in recent years, showing that migration experiences affect an individual's health and psychosocial well-being (Kratz, 2018).

During years, Albania has faced a very important migratory movement, with a significant departure of the population. Since 1990, about 20% of the Albanian population has left and lives across borders. Compared to other countries, the emigration flow of Albanians is about 4-5 times higher than the average rates of contemporary emigration. (Lerch, 2014)

In fact, there exist various causes for potential migration: among others, economic, educational, family, and health factors, as well as the perception of the respondents of their prospects in the home country. Yet, economic factors, which include the improvement of living standards, unemployment, low wages and labor conditions, social security schemes, and debt, remain the main drivers for Albanian migration. According to the 2018 survey, these factors represent 57% of the causes of migration, or more than half of all factors. This shows that Albanian migration, even in its third decade, continues to be driven by economic factors, although to a lesser extent (King, 2018: 60).

Nowdays, migration flows from Albania have decreased due to increased stability and economic progress in the country. However, given its circular nature, migration from Albania continues to occur, including return migration as part of the cycle. Analyzing the migratory flows, the voluntary return of Albanian citizens is a characteristic of the migratory flows. The negative impact of the economic crisis in some EU member states has affected the return of migrants, especially from Greece and Italy.

The intensification of the return of Albanian immigrants during 2016 is

mainly related to the continuation of the economic crisis in the host country, as well as the return of irregular immigrants (Zerba, 2013:38).

The return of migrants is potentially a very important process for the economic and social development of Albania. Returnees bring financial capital (savings), human capital (skills and know-how, new mentality and ideas, work habits, etc.), and social capital. However, this depends on the duration of the stay in the host country, and the reasons for returning. Potential benefits for the home country are maximized when the returnees have stayed long enough in the destination country to achieve their objectives regarding saving, education, or professional qualifications, or when they are still relatively young and wish to invest human and financial capital in their home country. On the other hand, it depends on the creation of premises in the home country to effectively utilize the human, financial, and social capital of returnees (King, 2018: 67).

Many returned asylum seekers currently live in more difficult economic conditions compared to the period before they left Albania, and they currently constitute a vulnerable group. According to a recent study, unemployment and lack of income are the key challenges faced by most of the returned asylum seekers (Gëdeshi, 2016: 36).

When they return, migrants lack adequate assistance and protection, including housing, employment, setting up new businesses, and access to healthcare. On the other hand, despite the need for empowerment and integration into a wider functional protection system, the efforts to support the school inclusion of returned children seem considerable, especially at the local level. However, overall, migrants expressed a lack of trust in institutions and in their capacity to effectively help them and their families (Zajmi, 2017:10).

Currently, with the increase in the average age of the population of Albania and the socioeconomic consequences, great importance is being given to policies for the prevention and reintegration of migrants to provide opportunities to stay in Albania.

For the first time, UNDP in 2015, explicitly includes migration in global development policy, but also addresses factors that shed light on migration from a rights perspective. They make an important contribution to a holistic approach to migration by addressing the full cycle of migration, including the return process and the (lack of) rights of migrants (Dhembo, 2018).

Referring to the situation of migration in the Municipality of Shkodër, the most widespread type of migration in Shkodër (or at least the most

reported) is emigration. Although migrants continue to use different types of irregular migration, it has been noticed that in recent years, potential migrants in Shkodër have begun to become aware of the danger they face and the few opportunities for integration that await them in the destination countries (Zajmi, 2017: 66).

Shkodër Municipality offers various social care services (mostly through community centers), which help in the well-being and social inclusion of individuals and families who need social care. With the entirety of the activity detailed in the Social Plan Shkodër, the needs for protection, care, rehabilitation, social inclusion, and reintegration of individuals will be met to fulfill the new responsibilities arising for the municipalities from the territorial administrative reform as well as the new law on social care services in the Republic of Albania (Social Plan of Shkoder Municipality, 2018-2021).

Among other things, Shkodër Municipality has cooperation agreements with various organizations that offer various services for the reintegration of individuals returning from emigration. Terre des homes intervention responds to the root causes of insecure and irregular migration, which remain the main obstacles to the reintegration of returnees after their return to Albania, including their weak economy and high unemployment, particularly among young people and women, low skills profiles of vulnerable returnees, social exclusion of marginalized and remote communities, and lack of access to care services.

Through the project "Sustainable socio-economic reintegration of migrants returned to Albania," Terre des hommes aims to achieve the sustainable reintegration of vulnerable returnees in Albania by empowering their capacity to improve their living conditions by guaranteeing access to qualitative and integrated services.

Also, The Migration and Diaspora Program (PMD) assists partner countries in harnessing the benefits of regular migration and engaging the diaspora for sustainable development. Working on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Program is active in 22 partner countries around the globe. The goal is to create a migration policy that satisfies the interests of the country and immigrants. For this purpose, the program builds the capacities of partner institutions through training and promotes the exchange of experience between partner countries.

In Shkodër, there is many migrants and Albanian families returned from

emigration after having lost their jobs in their destination countries because of economic crises. This group constitutes the largest number of users in the local Migration Center. Based in a study and according to the representative's institutions, since the beginning of 2009, the return to Shkodër has been at a high level. They reported that during this time, 299 returned migrants were registered in this office. Out of all the migrants interviewed, just few of them have gone to the Migration Desk to look for work, and none of them are thankful for this service. It is very difficult to get economic help, and none of them have received housing from the local government (Zajmi, 2017: 67).

This paper on the selected topic aims to assess the current situation of families returned from migration, examine the services provided in the city of Shkodra, and the process of their reintegration into the community. The three main **objectives** of the paper are:

- To identify more about the challenges of the immigration process of migrants in Shkodër Municipality.
- To assess the quality of social support programs for the process of empowering returned families.
- To understand the challenges of implementing programs in Shkodër Municipality.

#### ***Research questions***

1. What are the main challenges faced by families of returning immigrants in Shkodër Municipality?
2. What are the social programs being implemented in the Municipality of Shkodër and other partner organizations?
3. How effective are the services considered by the beneficiary families to empower and reintegrate?

***The importance of the paper:*** The realization of this paper aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the services benefited for their empowerment from the programs offered by the municipality of Shkodër and the organizations operating in the territory. A great importance is highlighted in the challenges faced by the beneficiaries as soon as they return to Albania regarding the support they receive from the institutions in the territory.

#### **Methods**

The methodology followed for the realization of the paper is discussed considering the topic itself, which focuses on the quality of services,

challenges, and achievements. The selected methodology is the qualitative method of data collection. The reason for selecting qualitative methodology lies in the broader understanding of the process itself in the city of Shkodra and gaining familiarity with the challenges faced by the beneficiaries in the city. The logical framework of the paper's design is addressed, providing a description of the paper and outlining the characteristics of the sample selected from this population.

**Sources and methods of data collection:** For the collection and provision of data, we utilized both categories of sources: primary and secondary. On the one hand, primary data were acquired through interviews with beneficiaries who returned from migration and received services. Among the secondary sources of data, we can mention various publications, reports, and articles from the internet, which are sourced from official websites.

**Population:** The population for the paper includes 15 women beneficiaries who returned from migration.

**Study sample:** The selection of participants in the paper was conducted through purposeful sampling, chosen due to the specific nature of the paper and the characteristics of the general population. The first criterion relates to the adequacy and extent to which the literature review in this field has enabled thorough examination. The individuals included in the paper needed to meet the following criteria:

1. To be beneficiaries of various services received from Shkodër municipality and partner organizations and institutions.
2. To be Albanian persons returned from migration, mainly countries: France, Germany, Greece, etc.
3. To be residents of Shkodër municipality or surrounding municipalities of Shkodër district.
4. To be part of the 30-45 age group active in the labor market.

In this study, 15 beneficiaries were interviewed, taking into consideration the fact that the information that was being received during the process was sufficient to answer the research questions and enrich the study with innovation.

**Data collection instrument:** The research instrument was a semi-structured in-depth interview, which in the first part includes an introduction to create a suitable atmosphere and provide general information, aiming to establish a climate of trust with the interviewee. It

addresses the services received by the beneficiaries, followed by an exploration of the challenges they encountered after returning to Albania. The final part is related to the future, allowing the interviewees to freely share their thoughts with the researcher.

***Procedure followed:*** The interview process was carried out face-to-face and over the phone. The interview process with each service provider lasted an average of 30-40 minutes and data collection took place between March - May. The interview process was accompanied by the preservation of the interviews. Following data collection, the procedure involved listening, reading, and transcribing the interviews. The researchers themselves transcribed the interviews, and access to the information was restricted solely to the researchers. Ensuring ethical considerations was a priority throughout this process.

***The ethical aspect:*** Every effort is made to protect the identity of participants. Before being interviewed, each participant was informed of the nature and purpose of their involvement, and the interviews will be recorded and transcribed. This probably affected the validity of the statements because the interviewees were promised that their statements would be treated confidentially and in a depersonalized manner.

## **Results**

The knowledge and attitudes are generally unique, however, there were some commonalities in the knowledge and attitudes of the participants in the study. From the analysis of the data collected through the interview as mentioned above, the interviews were semi-structured, that is, the directed questions were followed by clarifying or more detailed questions depending on the answer given by the interviewees.

**Data analysis:** Based on the analysis of the qualitative data collected from the interviews conducted with the 15 interviewees on migration, several fields and codes were identified, which, divided into categories and subcategories, became the subject of discussions in this study. During the data collection process with reference to individual interviews, the following 4 categories were identified:

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<b>1. Services provided for the empowerment of families returned from migration</b>	<b>a. The services provided during the case management process by the Community Centers "For the Family" in cooperation with partner organizations such as: Terre des hommes, Dimak, Woman to Woman, Differently Equal, etc.</b> <b>b. Services provided by the Regional Vocational Training Directorate, Local Education Office, Social Housing, Free Legal Aid, etc</b>
<b>2. Obstacles in the benefit of services and their sustainability in the community</b>	a. lack of information on the rights of returned migrants for the services they can receive. b. lack of trust from the institutions for the support they need for strengthening. c. prejudice and stigma to seek help.
<b>3. Main achievements by evaluating the quality of these services</b>	a. empowerment and social economic integration of families b. the benefit of the whole package of services, kindergarten registration, free school, housing rent, secure employment, direct economic support with food packages, medicines, household appliances, start-up, etc. c. the benefit of these services in an integrated way according to 3-month plans
<b>4. The main challenges according to the beneficiaries of these services.</b>	a. sustainability of services due to bureaucratic procedures and short-term projects that hinder the prevention of re-migration. b. the health condition of families and the level of high risk limits the increase of the capacities of families. c. creating the dependence of families on services, making it impossible to gradually disconnect and empower them.

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## Discussions

According to the analysis of the qualitative data, four main categories have been identified in this study, which will be the focus of the following discussions.

Starting with the statements of one of the beneficiaries, the challenges faced after their return were:

*“-Housing because I didn't have a shelter to stay, this was the main problem because I didn't have a place to stay. Of course, the economic side is a problem since we went to 0 there, but from there we returned even worse. Until the moment that the house rent from Shkoder municipality was found and I continue to have this bonus, 3 years from the municipality and 1 year from a church”. (W.8)*

It is noted that the challenges are quite big since and from the assertions of other benefits, housing is considered a basic and primary need for families after the return. Also, enrollment of children in school has been a primary challenge: *“-The children had a problem registering in school, but they received support from the municipality for their registration. The children have also received after-school support developed at the center”. (W.5)*

In relation to the support programs, the families see them as quite effective and necessary, although they emphasize the need for more long-term and more numerous services. *“-Programs from the municipality and organizations: housing rent, food packages, educational support for the child, clothes, children's items, kindergarten payment from the "Children's Villages" NGO for one girl, for the other from the municipality, medications, participation in meetings, household elections, etc”. (W.4)*

The interviews highlighted a recurring need among the beneficiaries: the prioritization of medication. This requirement was particularly emphasized in almost all interviews. Organizations such as Woman to Woman and SOS "Children's Villages" provide medication for children, but for adults, the coverage is insufficient.

*“-Services: business support, because they had a clothing store from terres des hommes. Food packages every month, school items for children. The girl is supported for her hairdressing business by the organization Save the Children. He also took part in parenting classes, support groups at the center, children are involved in psychosocial activities and after-school support”. (W.12)*



During the interview process regarding the effectiveness of the services, it is noticed that direct economic services (cash) or material basis are very important for the beneficiaries, due to the level of the families needs. In reference to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which are at the basic level, parenting programs and support groups do not value them as essential services. Among the services they received that were effective, they needed other things: laundry, economic assistance, food packages. The economic aspect has been the most significant. The after-school support service for children at the center has been received. For the major part, about 70% percent of the interviews, families evaluate it as difficult and suggest that there should be more opportunities for them for ease of work, suitable schedules for the needs of children, etc.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

The integration process has provided a lot of direct support in the Municipality of Shkodra for families, but they still emigrate and do not fully reintegrate into the community. Now, they are also facing dependence on services and the coordination process system takes time, so families need approximately 3-5 years to be empowered in their community. Also, the fact that most programs are limited and have time agreements causes a lack of trust among the beneficiaries.

Moreover, it is also believed that in most cases, beneficiaries have received numerous services, considering them as essential and difficult to be empowered without the support of the municipality or NGO s. Instead, they seek services that extend over a longer duration..

Some recommendation to improve the system are related to: Increasing the duration of services and creating facilities for receiving services in a timely and high-quality manner is essential. Another important aspect is keeping the sustainability of projects focusing on the empowerment of the families. Through, creating an integrated program for the target group of migrants offering a package of services. Key point to this process is the coordination of work between all structures government, local, ngo for the well-being of the families and their integration. Furthermore, developing programs to enhance family independence and reduce dependence on services is crucial.

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**SESSION II**

**SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND  
RESEARCH**



## **Social Services in the County Elbasan Under the Optics of Changes of the Framework Legal**

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### **Abstract**

The law defines the role and responsibilities of public institutions charged with its implementation, as well as clearly divides the categories of beneficiaries according to the need and type of service. The right to use social services belongs to individuals or families who do not have the minimum means of living and are not able to provide them with work or income from properties or other sources. The purpose of this study is to present a detailed analysis of the Elbasan District, the secure and provision of social services according to Law 121/2016 "On social care services", approved in November, 2016 through institutional and non-institutional forms of care, in order to help improve the quality of life and for people to be part of the society. Law 121/2016) on social care services in RSH, which aims how to regulate and provide social care services in order to help the well-being of the social inclusion of families and individuals who need social care as a mission of special importance in the Republic of Albania. By researching this issue, it is possible to provide a clear consensus for the clarification regarding the regulation of the legal framework, the beneficiaries of the services defined by law, as well as the impact that these services have on the beneficiaries. The study aims to present the main findings and provide supplementary explanations. This is an explanatory research and such a qualitative methodology was used with focus groups as its main instrument. The participants in the study were a total of 36 people, organized in 4 focus groups. The focus groups were organized based on leaders, local coordinators and social services specialists. In the general analysis of the focus group data, the social services that are offered according to the legal framework to the beneficiary categories, the organization of social services offered in the community and family, the

challenges and the impacts of the social services on the beneficiaries are mainly explained.

*Key words: Legal framework, Social services, Service beneficiaries, Analysis.*

## **Introduction**

For the first time in 2016, we have a dedicated law (Law 121/2016) for social care services in RSH, which aims to regulate and the way to provide and provide social care services in order to help the well-being of the social inclusion of families and individuals who need social care as a mission of special importance in the Republic of Albania.

Law 121/2016 "On social care services", approved in November 2016, aims to ensure and provide social services through institutional and non-institutional forms of care, in order to help improve the quality of life and social inclusion of people disadvantaged in society. The objective of the law is the regulation and provision of social services in such a way as to enable the timely discovery of the needs of the beneficiaries and the provision of those services that help prevent the occurrence and/or development of threatening conditions or situations that affect groups in need, implementing the reform of decentralization and deinstitutionalization of services, which aims to provide them almost entirely by local government units.

In contrast to the past, the law provides a clear overview of the type, definitions and list of social services to be provided by public, non-public (NGO) and private operators.

The law defines the role and responsibilities of public bodies charged with its implementation, as well as clearly divides the categories of beneficiaries according to the need and type of service. The right to use social services belongs to individuals or families who do not have the minimum means of living and are not able to provide them with work or income from property or other sources.

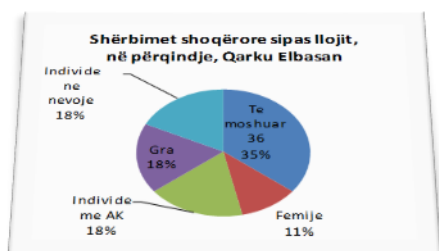
In its article 3, a series of definitions on the types of services are given, where new services are introduced that did not exist before. The law provides a clear overview of the type, definitions and list of social care services that will be offered by public and non-public operators. For the first time we will have a clear definition of social care services.



Cërrik	24 445	9	2	7									1	1 0
Belsh	19 503	6												
Përrerjas	24 906	8												
Gjithsej	29582 7	10 0	28	10 0	5			10 0	5	10 0	4	10 0	10	1 0 0

As the table shows, the specific weight of services for the elderly is the highest with 36% of the total, while the specific weight of services for women in need is the lowest with 11%.

The analysis according to the average number of beneficiaries per service



proves that: Individuals with CA and the elderly in Elbasan and Librazhd Municipalities have limited opportunities to use the services in their district, while in other municipalities of the district, this opportunity does not exist. Children have very limited use services in their municipalities

opportunities to use services in Elbasan and Cërrik, while children in other municipalities do not have the opportunity to use services.

Regarding the question about the provision of services, the non-public sector for community and residential social care services, the criteria, procedures for their benefit and the amount of personal expenses for the beneficiaries of the organized service and how it classifies the services, some from the answers of the respondents we are quoting them below.

<i>Information and awareness services are provided Psychoeducation (the case of pre-social services) in Elbasan and Librazhd</i>
<i>On-line telephone counseling service is offered 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in Elbasan, Gramsh, Cërriku partially</i>
<i>72-hour emergency service is offered for victims of domestic violence (or otherwise shelters) Elbasan, Cërrik</i>
<i>Protected housing service (social housing) is offered for victims of domestic violence (Case of long-term services) Elbasan</i>



*Social-psychological rehabilitation service is provided for victims by a psychologist or social worker (Case of specialized services) Elbasan Gramsh*

*Psychological or counseling services for offenders are provided by a psychologist or social worker (Case of specialized services) Elbasan*

Out of the 7 municipalities of the district, only 4 offer social services. Services for individuals in need constitute 36% of all district services. 80% of services for individuals in need are provided in Elbasan Municipality. Inaccuracies are found with the information because the number of beneficiaries of services in Elbasan Municipality is almost absent, which affects the inaccuracy of the information on "Beneficiaries of services by population group".

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

"Specialized services" are services provided by professionals profiled in various specialties. These services are offered at the county/regional and municipal level for children with pervasive developmental disorders, mental retardation, communication disorders, in need of physical training, sexually abused children, children in conflict with the law, as well as abused women and girls, violated or trafficked, as well as all categories that need such services.

Social services are mainly organized as community and family services for all identified categories of users, without excluding services in residential centers.

- The categories of beneficiaries of social services are detailed, article 6, point 1, letter c) which includes adults, with social problems, victims of proven drug addiction.
- Social services are organized as community and family services for all identified categories of users.
- The roles and powers of the central and local governments have been clearly separated for the first time in this law, which provides that the local government units plan, build, administer and regularly maintain the social services provided within their territory through the budget of the local government unit.

The competences of the local government in the provision of social services have been clearly defined.

In each municipality, a structure for social services will be established as a separate unit of the structure of the municipalities, separating the duties of the social coordinator who deals with KESH payments from the duties of an employee dedicated to family services, who must be a professional figure.

• Setting up the social service financing mechanism for municipalities. These municipalities not only have the biggest obligation but also have the social fund that will support them in the realization of this task.

Specifically, the sources of financing for social services that are realized by public and non-public institutions consist of:

- funds from the State Budget, including the Social Fund.
- funds from the budgets of local government units.
- certain revenues from assets and other activities of the municipality.
- service fees for beneficiaries of social services.
- donations, sponsorships, donations, and other funding from organizations, natural or legal persons.

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## **Loneliness and Empathy Among Educational Sciences Students: A Cross-sectional Study**

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### **Abstract**

Loneliness and empathy are two important psychological constructs that have received significant attention in the literature. Loneliness is a subjective feeling of social isolation and has been associated with a range of negative health outcomes, including depression and anxiety. Empathy, on the other hand, refers to the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, and it has been linked to positive outcomes, such as prosocial behaviour and improved interpersonal relationships. Recent research has found an inverse correlation between loneliness and empathy among younger adults. Accordingly, the objective of this study was to investigate this relationship utilizing a cross-sectional quantitative design. A sample of 172 students (145 female and 27 male) from the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Shkoder was selected through a purposive non probability sampling. Participants were administered online the UCLA Loneliness Scale and the Multidimensional Emotional Empathy Scale (MEES) to assess their levels of loneliness and empathy, respectively. The results revealed a weak but positive correlation between loneliness and empathy, with loneliness predicting a small but statistically significant portion of the variation in empathy levels. Female students demonstrated higher levels of empathy than male ones, although no significant differences in loneliness were observed between the two groups. Additionally, no significant differences in loneliness or empathy were found across different age groups. However, students of psychology exhibited higher levels of loneliness, while students of social work higher levels of empathy. Furthermore, students in their first year of study showed higher levels of empathy than those in later years of study. These findings have significant implications for educators and mental health professionals

who work with students and may inform interventions and programs aimed at addressing loneliness and promoting empathy. Although this study has made some important contributions to the existing body of knowledge on prosocial behaviour, further research is required to comprehend the underlying mechanisms of the relationship between loneliness and empathy in this population.

*Key words: Loneliness, Empathy, Prosocial behaviour, Quantitative study, Students.*

### **Introduction**

Loneliness and empathy are two fundamental constructs in the field of social psychology that have garnered substantial attention from researchers due to their significant impact on individuals' well-being and social functioning. Loneliness refers to the distressing emotional experience arising from a perceived deficit in one's social relationships, characterized by feelings of isolation, emptiness, and disconnection from others (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). On the other hand, empathy encompasses the capacity to understand and share the emotions, perspectives, and experiences of others, involving both cognitive and affective processes (Decety & Lamm, 2006; Eisenberg & Eggum, 2009). The study of loneliness has revealed its detrimental effects on psychological and physical well-being. Perceived social isolation has been associated with a range of negative outcomes, including increased risk of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Furthermore, loneliness is linked to cognitive impairments, including attentional deficits and memory problems (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). Understanding the factors contributing to loneliness and its consequences is crucial for developing interventions to alleviate its negative impact and promote social connection. Empathy, on the other hand, plays a critical role in social interactions and prosocial behavior. It allows individuals to understand and share the emotional states of others, facilitating the formation of social bonds and fostering positive relationships (Decety & Lamm, 2006; Eisenberg & Eggum, 2009). Empathy has been associated with various positive outcomes, including the promotion of altruistic behavior (Cialdini et al., 1997; Eisenberg & Eggum, 2009) and the establishment of effective patient-provider relationships in healthcare settings (Hojat et al., 2001). Given its relevance to social functioning and well-being, investigating the

mechanisms underlying empathy and its implications is vital for promoting positive social connections and enhancing interpersonal understanding. Research examining the interplay between loneliness and empathy shed light on how empathic processes are associated with feelings of loneliness and social connection. The study conducted by Qualter and colleagues (2015) found a negative relationship between loneliness and empathy across different stages of life. They found that individuals who experienced higher levels of loneliness tended to exhibit lower levels of empathy. The results suggest that loneliness may impede individuals' ability to connect with and understand the emotions and experiences of others. Cacioppo and colleagues (2015) discussed the relationship between loneliness and empathy in the context of clinical importance and interventions. They highlighted that loneliness can lead to reduced empathic responses, making it more challenging for individuals experiencing loneliness to understand and respond to others' emotions. The findings suggest that loneliness may hinder the ability to engage in empathic behaviors, potentially impacting social interactions and relationships. Notably, a study conducted by Smith and colleagues (2021) found also an inverse correlation between loneliness and empathy in young adults. This finding highlights the potential impact of loneliness on one's ability to understand and connect with others emotionally. Further research is necessary to better comprehend the complex interplay between these constructs and to explore potential mediators or moderators that may influence the observed association.

In addition to examining the overall relationship between loneliness and empathy, we also aimed to explore potential gender differences in these constructs. Prior research has indicated that females tend to exhibit higher levels of empathy compared to males (Davis, 1996). Therefore, it is of interest to determine whether gender plays a role in the observed relationship between loneliness and empathy in this particular sample. Furthermore, we sought to investigate differences in loneliness and empathy across different age groups within the student population. While previous studies have suggested that loneliness may vary across different stages of life (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010), it is essential to explore whether similar variations exist in empathy levels among students. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the association between loneliness and empathy among a sample of students from the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Shkoder, utilizing a cross-sectional quantitative design. By examining the levels of loneliness and empathy in this specific population, we sought to contribute to the existing

literature and enhance our understanding of the relationship between these constructs.

By examining the existing literature and conducting empirical research, we seek to address the following research questions:

What is the relationship between loneliness and empathy among students of Educational Sciences students?

Can loneliness predict empathy among Educational Sciences students?

Are there differences in the rates of loneliness in relation to gender, age, academic discipline and year of study?

Are there differences in the rates of empathy in relation to gender, age, academic discipline and year of study?

## **Methodology**

### *Participants*

A total of 172 students (145 female and 27 male) from the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Shkoder were purposively selected to participate in this cross-sectional quantitative study. The sample size and gender distribution were based on the availability and willingness of students to participate.

### *Measures*

Two self-report measures were administered online to assess the participants' levels of loneliness and empathy. The UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996) was used to measure loneliness. This scale consists of 20 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of loneliness. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient, estimated is .906.

The Multidimensional Emotional Empathy Scale (MEES) was used to assess empathy (Leckie & Côté, 2017). The MEES includes items that measure cognitive empathy, affective empathy, and empathic concern. The participants rated their agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of empathy, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .936.

### *Procedure*

Ethical approval was obtained prior to conducting the study. We contacted potential participants through email and provided them with a link to an online survey platform. The purpose and nature of the study were explained, and participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. They were instructed to complete the survey in a quiet and comfortable environment. The online survey was accessible for a specific

time period to allow participants to complete it at their convenience.

### *Data Analysis*

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize the participants' levels of loneliness and empathy. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between loneliness and empathy. Additionally, linear regression analysis was performed to determine the extent to which loneliness predicted variation in empathy levels. T-tests was conducted to examine differences in loneliness and empathy based on gender and ANOVA analysis to explore differences in loneliness and empathy across different age groups, academic disciplines, and years of study.

### **Results**

The descriptive analysis of the survey data reveals interesting insights about the characteristics of the respondents. Among the students, 16% were male, while the majority, accounting for 84%, were female. This indicates a significant gender imbalance in the sample. The respondents' ages were categorized into several groups, each representing a specific range. The largest age group was 20-21 years old, comprising 41.3% of the respondents. Following closely behind was the 18-19 years old group, accounting for 37.8%. The smaller age groups consisted of 22-23 years old (7.6%), 24-25 years old (4.7%), and those above 26 years old (8.7%). These results suggest that the majority of the respondents were in their late teens to early twenties, with a smaller proportion being older than 25. Among the respondents, 29% were studying Psychology, while 41.9% were pursuing Social Work and 29.1% were engaged in Physics education. These findings indicate that Social Work was the most prevalent discipline among the respondents. The analysis revealed that the largest proportion of respondents (51.7%) were in their second year of study. The first-year students accounted for 29.7% of the sample. The subsequent years had smaller percentages, with 9.9% in the third year, 2.9% in the fourth year, and 5.8% in the fifth year. These findings suggest that the survey primarily captured the perspectives of second-year students, with fewer respondents in higher academic years.

Gender differences in loneliness and empathy were examined using independent samples t-tests. The results revealed that female students demonstrated significantly higher levels of empathy ( $M = 95.91$ ,  $SD =$

7.15) compared to male students ( $M = 92.07$ ,  $SD = 8.07$ ),  $t(170) = 2.511$ ,  $p < .05$ . However, no significant differences in loneliness were observed between female students ( $M = 13.8$ ,  $SD = 12.43$ ) and male students ( $M = 10.8$ ,  $SD = 9.7$ ),  $t(170) = 1.504$ ,  $p > .05$ .

Table 1. Mean Scores, Standard Deviation, and t-values of female and male students in relation to loneliness and empathy.

Variables	Gender	N	Mean	S. Deviation	t (170)	F	P
Loneliness	Female	145	13.8	12.43	1.504	2.585	.134
	Male	27	10.8	9.7			
Empathy	Female	145	95.91	7.15	2.511	.375	.013
	Male	27	92.07	8.07			

To explore potential differences in loneliness and empathy across different age groups, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. However, no significant differences in loneliness ( $F(4,167) = .889$ ,  $p > .05$ ) or empathy ( $F(4,167) = 1.047$ ,  $p > .05$ ) were found across different age groups.

Table 2. Mean, standard deviation, F and P for age variable in loneliness and empathy.

Variables	Group	N	Mean	S. Deviation	F (4, 167)	P
Loneliness	18-19	65	13.91	12.44	.889	.472
	20-21	71	14.22	12.27		
	22-23	13	8.92	11.80		
	24-25	8	9.75	5.80		
	over 26	15	10.87	12.41		
Empathy	18-19	65	95.92	7.71	1.047	.385
	20-21	71	95.67	6.65		
	22-23	13	93.46	9.98		
	24-25	8	91.00	7.82		
	over 26	15	94.86	6.79		

Differences in loneliness and empathy among students of different



academic discipline were examined using one-way ANOVAs. The results indicated that students of psychology exhibited significantly higher levels of loneliness ( $M = 15.44$ ,  $SD = 12.71$ ) compared to students of social work ( $M = 14.84$ ,  $SD = 12.99$ ) and physics education ( $M = 8.60$ ,  $SD = 8.5$ ),  $F(2,169) = 5.402$ ,  $p < .05$ . Conversely, students of social work demonstrated significantly higher levels of empathy ( $M = 96.69$ ,  $SD = 6.81$ ) compared to students of psychology ( $M = 96.06$ ,  $SD = 7.01$ ) and physics education ( $M = 92.58$ ,  $SD = 8.01$ ),  $F(2,169) = 5.138$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Table 3. Mean, standard deviation, F and P for academic discipline in loneliness and empathy

Variables	Group	N	Mean	S. Deviation	F (2, 169)	p
Loneliness	Psychology	50	15.44	12.71	5.402	.005
	Social Work	72	14.84	12.99		
	Physics Education	50	8.60	8.5		
Empathy	Psychology	50	96.06	7.01	5.138	.007
	Social Work	72	96.69	6.81		
	Physics Education	50	92.58	8.01		

The results of differences in loneliness and empathy across different years of study indicated that students in their first year of study ( $M = 97.47$ ,  $SD = 6.47$ ) showed significantly higher levels of empathy compared to students in later years of study  $F(4,167) = 4.657$ ,  $p < .05$ . However, no significant differences in loneliness were found across different years of study,  $F(4,167) = .811$ ,  $p > .05$ .

Table 4. Mean, standard deviation, F and P of years of study in loneliness and empathy.

Variables	Group	N	Mean	S. Deviation	F (4, 167)	p
Loneliness	First	51	13.88	13.83	.811	.520
	Second	89	13.58	11.86		
	Third	17	13.88	11.03		
	Fourth	5	7.00	9.54		
	Fifth	10	8.30	5.77		
Empathy	First	51	97.47	6.47	4.657	.001
	Second	89	94.83	7.81		
	Third	17	96.06	6.42		
	Fourth	5	95.80	2.59		
	Fifth	10	87.10	5.78		

The correlation between loneliness and empathy was examined using

Pearson's correlation coefficient. The findings of the study indicate that there is a weak positive correlation between loneliness and empathy ( $r = .254^{**}$ ,  $n = 172$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Furthermore, the results reveal a weak positive correlation between loneliness and some of subscales of empathy including suffering ( $r = .163^{**}$ ,  $n = 172$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and feel for others ( $r = .281^{**}$ ,  $n = 172$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Additionally, a moderate to a strong correlation can be observed between empathy and nearly all of its sub-dimensions including suffering ( $r = .748^{**}$ ,  $n = 172$ ,  $p < .01$ ), positive sharing ( $r = .666^{**}$ ,  $n = 172$ ,  $p < .01$ ), emotional attention ( $r = .473^{**}$ ,  $n = 172$ ,  $p < .01$ ), feel for others ( $r = .544^{**}$ ,  $n = 172$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and emotional contagion ( $r = -.366^{**}$ ,  $n = 172$ ,  $p < .01$ ). For a more comprehensive overview of these findings, please refer to Table 5.

Table 5. Pearson's correlation coefficient for the research variables

	Loneliness	Empathy	Suffering	Positive sharing	Responsive crying	Emotional attention	Feel for others	Emotional contagion
Loneliness	1	.254*	.163**	.051	-.087	.031	.281**	.035
Empathy		1	.748**	.666**	.021	.473**	.544**	-.366**
Suffering			1	.564**	-.211**	.188*	.280**	-.392**
Positive sharing				1	-.272**	.111	.268**	-.599**
Responsive crying					1	.523**	.019	.021
Emotional attention						1	.200**	-.247**
Feel for others							1	-.317**
Emotional contagion								1

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-way)

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-way)

To investigate the predictive value of loneliness on empathy, a linear regression analysis was conducted, with loneliness as the predictor variable and empathy as the outcome variable. The results indicated that loneliness

predicted a small but statistically significant portion of the variation in empathy levels. The results of the regression analysis indicate that loneliness can account for a small portion of the differences observed in empathy scores among the participants (6.4%), ( $R^2 = .064$ ,  $F(1,170) = 11.697$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Table 6. Linear Regression analysis showing the effect of loneliness on empathy

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients				Collinearity statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	r <sup>2</sup>	p	Tolerance	VIF
Loneliness	.155	.045	.254	3.4	.064	.000	1.000	1.000

a Predictors: (Constant); Loneliness

b Dependent variable: Empathy

## Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between loneliness and empathy among students from the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Shkoder. The findings revealed a weak but positive correlation between loneliness and empathy, suggesting that individuals who experience higher levels of loneliness also tend to have lower levels of empathy. These results are contradictory with previous research that has shown an inverse relationship between loneliness and empathy among younger adults (Hawkley et al., 2009; Qualter et al., 2013). The positive correlation between loneliness and empathy implies that as feelings of loneliness increase, the ability to understand and share the feelings of others increases. This finding highlights the potential impact of loneliness on social cognition and interpersonal relationships. Loneliness may lead individuals to become more preoccupied with their own emotional states and comprehend the emotions of others. The present study also found gender differences in empathy levels, with female students displaying higher levels of empathy compared to male students. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that women tend to exhibit greater empathic abilities compared to men (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983; Christov-Moore et al., 2014). The gender differences observed in empathy levels may be influenced by a combination of biological, social, and

cultural factors. For instance, societal norms and gender socialization may shape the development and expression of empathy, leading to variations between males and females (Eisenberg et al., 2015). It is important to consider these gender differences in empathy when designing interventions or programs aimed at promoting empathy and reducing loneliness among students. Interestingly, no significant differences in loneliness were found between female and male students in this study. This suggests that while females may demonstrate higher levels of empathy, they do not necessarily experience greater feelings of loneliness. Loneliness is a complex psychological construct influenced by various factors such as social support, attachment styles, and personal characteristics (Hawkley et al., 2009). The absence of gender differences in loneliness levels indicates that other factors, beyond gender alone, may contribute to the experience of loneliness among university students.

Moreover, no significant differences in loneliness or empathy were observed across different age groups in this study. This finding contrasts with some previous research that has indicated age-related differences in loneliness and empathy (Qualter et al., 2013; Ladd et al., 2014). The lack of age differences in this study's sample of university students suggests that loneliness and empathy may be relatively stable constructs during this stage of development. However, it is important to note that the sample primarily consisted of students within the same age range, limiting the generalizability of these findings to other age groups. Future research with more diverse age ranges would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between loneliness and empathy across the lifespan.

The study also examined the differences in loneliness and empathy among students in different academic disciplines. It was found that psychology students reported higher levels of loneliness, while social work students exhibited higher levels of empathy. These findings may reflect the nature of these academic disciplines and the potential influence of educational experiences on psychological well-being and empathic abilities. It is possible that students of psychology, who are often exposed to the study of mental health and psychopathology, may develop a heightened awareness of their own emotional struggles, potentially leading to increased feelings of loneliness. On the other hand, social work students may receive training and education that enhances their empathic skills, enabling them to better understand and connect with others' emotions. These discipline-related differences highlight the importance of considering academic context and

curriculum in understanding psychological well-being and empathic abilities among students. Furthermore, the study found that students in their first year of study reported higher levels of empathy compared to those in later years of study. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that empathy levels may decline over the course of undergraduate education (Davis et al., 2011). The transition to university and the demands of academic life may contribute to a decrease in empathic abilities over time. However, it is worth noting that this study utilized a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to make causal claims or determine the direction of this relationship. Future longitudinal research would provide a clearer understanding of how empathy levels change throughout students' academic journey and the factors that contribute to these changes. The findings of this study have important implications for educators and mental health professionals working with university students. The positive association between loneliness and empathy highlights the need to address loneliness as a potential barrier to empathic engagement and prosocial behavior. Interventions aimed at reducing loneliness among students should consider incorporating strategies to enhance empathy skills, as increased empathy has been associated with more positive social outcomes (Decety et al., 2016). Additionally, the gender differences observed in empathy levels suggest that interventions promoting empathy may need to be tailored to specific gender-related characteristics and socialization processes. The study's findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the use of a cross-sectional design restricts the ability to establish causal relationships between loneliness and empathy. Future longitudinal or experimental studies could provide more robust evidence regarding the temporal and directional nature of this relationship. Second, the sample consisted of students from a single university and a specific faculty, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other populations. Replication with diverse samples would enhance the external validity of the study. Third, the reliance on self-report measures introduces the potential for response biases and common method variance. Future studies could incorporate multiple assessment methods, such as behavioral observations or physiological measures, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of loneliness and empathy. Lastly, the study did not investigate the underlying mechanisms that may explain the relationship between loneliness and empathy. Future research should explore potential mediators or moderators of this relationship, such as emotional regulation strategies or social support networks, to gain a deeper understanding of the

complex interplay between these constructs.

### **Conclusions and recommendation**

In conclusion, this quantitative study explored the relationship between loneliness and empathy among a sample of students from the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Shkoder. The findings revealed a weak but positive correlation between loneliness and empathy, indicating that as levels of loneliness increased, so did levels of empathy. Loneliness was found to predict a small but statistically significant portion of the variation in empathy levels. Gender differences were observed, with female students demonstrating higher levels of empathy than male students. However, no significant differences in loneliness were found between the two groups. Additionally, age was not found to be a significant factor in loneliness or empathy levels. The study also highlighted discipline-specific differences, with psychology students exhibiting higher levels of loneliness and social work students exhibiting higher levels of empathy. Moreover, students in their first year of study showed higher levels of empathy compared to those in later years. These findings have important implications for educators and mental health professionals working with students. Interventions and programs aimed at addressing loneliness and promoting empathy can be informed by these results. It is crucial to consider the relationship between loneliness and empathy in order to enhance students' well-being and foster positive interpersonal relationships. Although this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on prosocial behaviour, further research is needed to better understand the underlying mechanisms of the relationship between loneliness and empathy in this specific population. Future studies could explore longitudinal designs or qualitative approaches to provide a deeper understanding of the factors influencing loneliness and empathy among students.

Overall, this study underscores the significance of addressing loneliness and promoting empathy among students, and the need for continued research in this area to support their psychological well-being and social development.

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## **The Phenomenon of Bullying in Lower Secondary Schools of Tirana**

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### **Abstract**

Schools have historically been a place of peace, harmony and knowledge. However, this panorama is changing. Increasingly, school bullying is attracting the attention of many researchers, the media, school authorities, and parents who are concerned about the safety and well-being of students. International studies on the prevalence of bullying show that a large number of students are involved or affected by this phenomenon with serious psychosocial consequences that can lead to suicide. The safety of all members in the school environment and the absence of aggressive behavior is an essential condition for promoting an effective school that enhances the academic, emotional, and social well-being of its students. The Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes the importance of protecting the quality of life of the child and their right to be educated in a safe environment, free from violence, harassment and neglect.

Therefore, this study aims to make an in-depth analysis of the prevalence and nature of bullying in 9-year-old schools in the city of Tirana. The selected grades are grades VI to IX, which are known in the literature as lower secondary education. The researcher used quantitative research strategies. n = 853 students from eleven 9-year schools of the city of Tirana participated in the study. The results from the standardized questionnaire with students showed that bullying is an integral part of the schools studied. Approximately 42.3% of students are involved in the phenomenon of bullying, of which 12.9% are only aggressors; 21.7% of them are victims and 7.7% are both victims and aggressors at the same time.

*Key words: Bullying, Aggressive behavior, Victims, Aggressors, Aggressor-Victim Category.*

## Introduction

Aggressive behavior and violence against children is a serious problem that endangers the development and well-being of children, violates basic rights, dignity and can endanger their lives.

In the research that has been done on bullying, it appears that different definitions and the results of observers, in essence, lead to different questions, answers and conclusions. So it is necessary to find a common definition of bullying, which should include all the characteristics of the phenomenon. Dr. Peter Paul Heinemann (Peter Paul Heinemann, 1972), a physician and Holocaust survivor, developed a theory about bullying as a result of observing the hostility the local community had toward his adopted son, who was black. Heinemann observed the instinctive violent behavior of a group of birds within their community, which in ethology<sup>18</sup> is called "mobbing" (mobbing)<sup>19</sup>, which attacked the weakest member of their flock in a group. As a result of this behavior he developed the concept of group aggression towards a particular child.

A young Swedish academic named Dan Olweus took Heinemann's theory into account, but disagreed with the idea that mobbing was "group" behavior. Instead, as Bazelon describes in her book, Olweus believed that the opposite was true: Typically, a small group of two or three students caused the majority of bullying incidents in a classroom, and until in 30 percent of children who were bullied were victimized by the same person. When in 1978 Olweus translated his book "Aggressiveness in school" from Swedish to English, he chose the English word bullying (read bulling) to describe this cruel behavior that appeared in the school environment. Over time, Olweus refined the meaning of bullying, making it clearer and separating it from random incidents of violence or conflicts that occurred at school. We say that a student is a victim of bullying when one or more other students:

- They say insulting, hurtful things or make fun of him, make fun of him and make fun of him.
- Completely ignore or exclude him from his peer group, or deliberately leave him out of class activities.
- Hit, kick, push or lock him in a room.
- They gossip about him or spread false rumors about him or send him malicious notes and try to make other students angry with him.
- They do other hurtful things like those mentioned above.

When we talk about the phenomenon of bullying, these things happen more

than once and the student who is the victim of this phenomenon is unable to defend himself or herself. It is called bullying even if only one of the above situations occurs. It is not bullying when the action is done in a friendly way or for fun. Also, it is not called bullying, when two students of almost equal power or power are insulted or physically fight with each other. (Olweus, 2001)

Also, according to studies, it has been noticed that the following three groups of individuals are directly involved in the phenomenon of bullying: The first group includes the aggressors, who are also the authors of this aggressive behavior. Olweusi (1991) has argued that the main characteristics of aggressors are being impulsive, aggressive, physical power and controlling behavior over others. They seem to have a positive perception of violence and use mainly aggressive strategies to manage their personal conflicts, because they do not have the ability to choose something different from the usual or traditional way of peaceful conflict resolution (Hoover, 2003; Wolke, 2004).

The second group includes the victims, who are students who fall prey to bullying. Victims tend to show high levels of anxiety and depression (Hodges & Perry, 1999). They typically have low self-esteem and poor social skills (Egan & Perry, 1998), do not actively participate in school activities (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997) and exhibit psychosomatic symptoms (Boulton & Smith 1994), have difficulty trusted others, show aggression, have a lack of security, stay isolated, etc. All the above shows can last for years. The third group includes the aggressor-victims, who are the children involved in the aggressive behavior of both roles, that is, they behave both as aggressors and as victims. They experience the greatest consequences and problems among all children involved in bullying, showing difficulties in coping with negative emotions or problematic and difficult circumstances, turning the problems away from themselves. For example, a girl who is a victim of bullying blames herself and withdraws from social activities, that is, isolates herself. But these children also show problematic and negative behavior, which is not directed at themselves, but at others, which they show through leaving school, through aggressive behavior with others, through damage to the personal belongings of others, etc. (Nansel, 2001; Juvenon, 2003; Veenstra, 2005; Arseneault, 2008; Georgiou & Stavriniades, 2013).

Studies have consistently shown that school bullying is a global phenomenon. It has begun to be identified as an aspect of social life at school, where the impact it has on the social, emotional, psychological and

educational development of students is now widely known and accepted (Collins, 2002). To react to this phenomenon, governments in many countries of the world carry out periodic studies on bullying to determine its trends and evolution and have created policies to challenge these behaviors. (Edmondson and Zeman, 2001).

In this context, it is very important and appropriate for each country to study the prevalence of bullying and its characteristics and make an analysis of the strategies followed by the school for the prevention and treatment of this problem. Acknowledging the existence of violence in school, which has traditionally been a place to grow and educate, is particularly painful. Therefore, many people believe that bullying is a natural and transitory phenomenon in child and adolescent development and will eventually disappear when young people grow up and become more mature.

But studies in several industrialized countries have challenged this philosophy by showing the long-term and lasting consequences that the nature of bullying and violence has on children. Referring to these studies, aggressive attitudes and behaviors learned at an early age and the consequences these behaviors have on victims tend to be stable and present even in adulthood.

There are therefore two main reasons why bullying behavior should be studied: firstly, because the prevalence of bullying and the harm it causes is often underestimated by many children, teachers and adults, and secondly, the nature of bullying requires the use of special intervention methods. and its prevention and not the same ones used for other forms of conflict between children (Limber & Nation, 1998)

First, most bullying occurs because of prejudice and discrimination. In the capital's schools, students are heterogeneous and come from different social and cultural backgrounds, an ideal environment for bullying to occur. Therefore, it is necessary to know: *What happens in the capital's schools? How widespread is this phenomenon and with what characteristics does it appear?*

## **Methodology**

### *The purpose of the study*

The purpose of this study stems from the need to conduct a study on the phenomenon of bullying in the Albanian context. It aims to make an in-depth analysis of the frequency and nature of bullying in the lower

secondary education of the city of Tirana.

#### *Study methodology*

For the realism of this study, the quantitative method was used. The data was collected through a standardized and validated questionnaire/ that gives the desired result with 40 closed questions for students.

#### *Study instrument*

Bullying frequency, forms, causes, effects, location were measured through the standardized questionnaire created by Dan Olweusi. This questionnaire is called the "Revised Olweus Aggressor/Victim Questionnaire" (PAVO for short). PAVO is one of the components of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (the most popular and used in schools worldwide). Measurements on psychometric qualities made internationally show us that the results of the questionnaire accurately illustrate the degree of frequency and types of bullying in school.

#### *Validity and reliability*

The questionnaire was subjected to the two-way translation method. It was then subjected to a pilot test before undergoing psychometric testing. The reliability of the test-retest resulted in Pearson's coefficient  $r=0.78$  in the case of being a victim and  $r=0.77$  in the case of being an aggressor. ( $n=40$ , for a 7-day period) Cronbach's alpha 0.71, in the case of questions about being a victim, and 0.75, in the case of questions about being an aggressor.

#### *Sample size*

Initially, schools were selected according to three criteria: the size of the school, the average annual grade for the 2012-2013 school year and the municipal unit. Then the students were randomly selected. The population of all schools (46 that met the conditions for this study) in Tirana from grade VI to grade IX was 19. Our 542 sample resulted in  $n=853$  students (margin of error  $\pm 3.3\%$  and confidence level 95% ( $p=0.05$ )).

#### *Data analysis*

The chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test was used for the relationship between categorical variables. In those cases when the data had a non-normal distribution, it was necessary to verify the consistency of the results, using the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis H test.

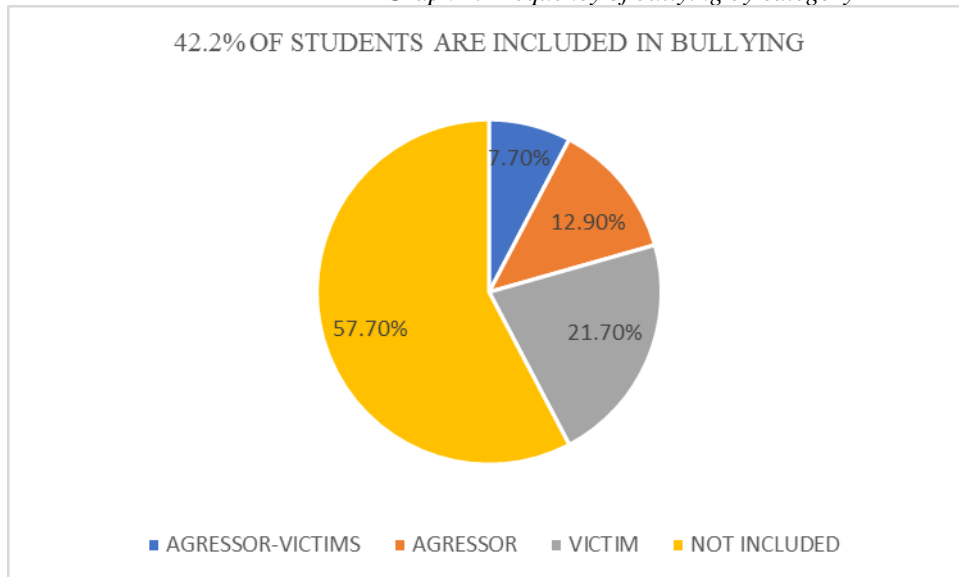
### **Main results of the study**

#### *Frequency of bullying by category*

In the schools that were analyzed, it was found that 57.7% of students affirmed that they have not been victims of bullying in the last months, while 42.3% of them have admitted that they have been victims of bullying

to a certain degree, of which about 21.7 % of students admitted that they were victims of bullying; 12.9% reported that he was the aggressor and 7.7% both the victim and the aggressor.

*Graph 1. Frequency of bullying by category*

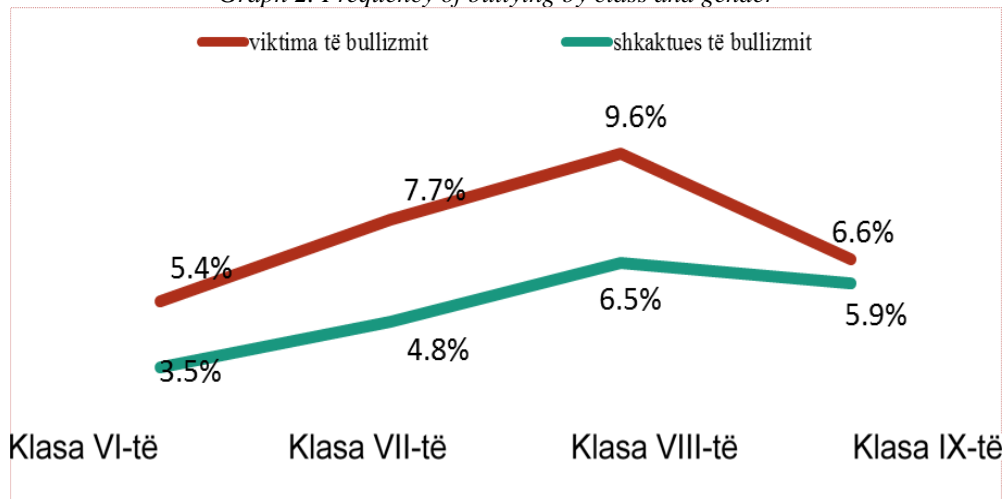


*Frequency of bullying by class and gender*

In terms of gender, there is a very small difference between boys and girls in the prevalence of being victims ( $\chi^2(4, 853) = 3.991, p=0.407$ ). In total, about 29.4% (251) of the participants were victims of bullying, where 31.2% (127) are girls and 27.8% (124) are boys.

Also, even when we analyze the classes according to gender, the percentage of victims has a difference of 1% from each other. From the data, it seems that the target group most "attacked" are eighth grade girls, who make up about 10.1% (41 girls) of the total number of girls (127) of the sample of the group of students who are victims of bullying, while slightly affected by this phenomenon are sixth grade girls with 5.2% (21 girls) of the total number of girls (127) of the sample of the group of students who are victims of bullying. Even for boys, the trend is the same, with a very small difference. The chi-square test showed that there is a statistically significant relationship between the frequency of bullying and the class students attend ( $\chi^2(3, 853) = 14.484, p=0.002$ )

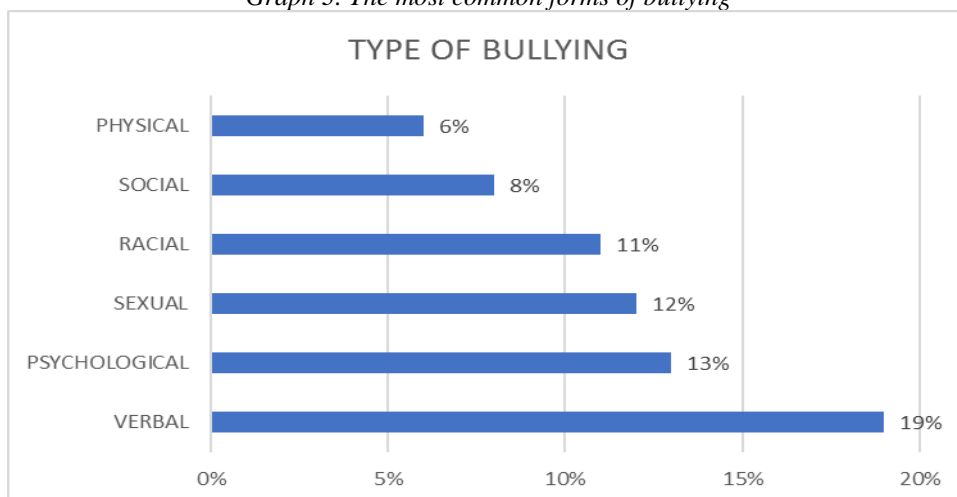
Graph 2. Frequency of bullying by class and gender



*The most common forms of bullying*

In our sample, the most widespread form of bullying was the verbal one: "I was laughed at, insulted, or teased by one or several students?" it happened more often for both boys and girls with 19%. While, the second most common form was "Other students have slandered me or spread false rumors about me and tried to make others angry with me" which was reported in a percentage of 13%. The third most common response among students was: "I have been called names, comments or gestures that had a sexual undertone" with 12%.

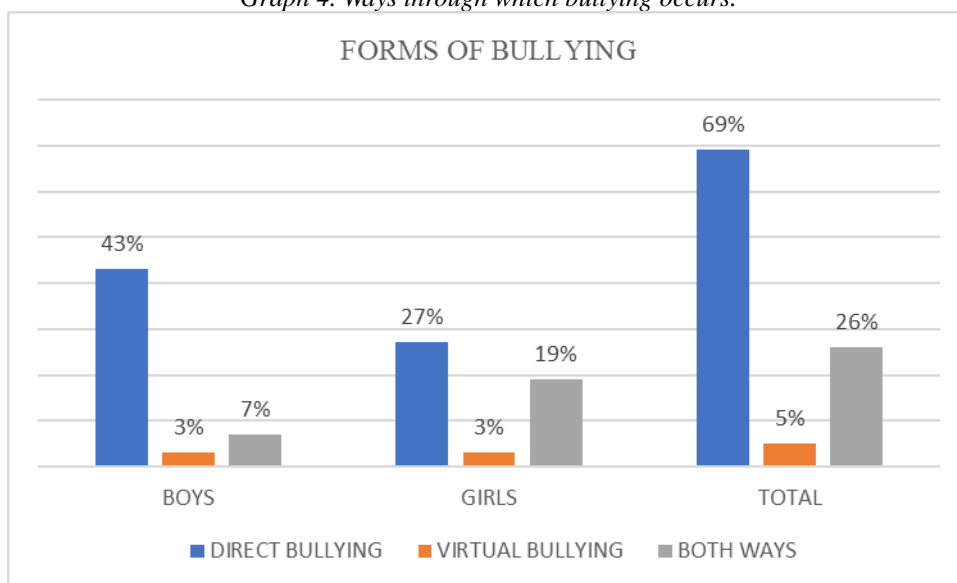
Graph 3. The most common forms of bullying



*Ways through which bullying occurs*

From the graph below, we see that in general students have been victims of face-to-face bullying with 69% (where 27% are girls and 43% are boys). While only 5% of students have suffered bullying in a virtual form where we see an equal distribution between girls and boys, while for both forms we have a percentage of 26%, where also in this case the percentage of boys and girls is 7% for girls and 19% for boys. For gender differences (X<sup>2</sup> (6, 79) = 4.444 p=0.217

Graph 4. Ways through which bullying occurs.



*The places where the phenomenon of bullying happens the most.*

In order to find out where bully activities happen most often, the students were asked about the places where they have been victims of these activities. Since students can be victims of bullying in different places, they were instructed to mark more than one answer. The results of the chart showed that the vast majority of students, 64.2% (161), stated that they had been victims of bullying "in the classroom, when the teacher was not present".

The second hottest area where this phenomenon occurs was "in the yard/or the sports field" with a figure of 29.5% (74). As shown in the table below, the third most common place of this phenomenon was "in corridors/stairs" with 27.5% (69) of cases. The study showed that girls have a greater



tendency to report that they were more often victims of bullying "when the teacher was not present", compared to boys. However, boys are more likely than girls to report being victims "in the school yard" (with 17.9%, compared to 11.6% for girls) and "during physical education class" (14.7%, compared to 8.8% for girls), and this is also shown by chi squared ( $\chi^2(1, n=251) = 9.225, p=0.002$ ).

### **Age, gender and number of aggressors who have attacked victims of bullying**

The relationship between the class frequented by the perpetrators of these aggressive behaviors and the gender of the students is summarized in Table 1. There is a relationship between the gender of the victims and the class in which the aggressors are ( $X^2(5, 853) = 11.396 p=0.044$ ). Both girls and boys are attacked more by students who are in their class in 34.6% of cases followed by students in a higher class with 6.7%. Girls have a greater tendency to report being assaulted by students of the same year (6.6%) but in different grades, while boys tend to be assaulted more by students in higher grades with 8.3% of cases. While only five students stated that they were victims of bullying by aggressors who attend lower classes, this is because, as we have said, the victims of bullying have less power and power than the aggressors.

*Tabela 1 Klasa në të cilën ndodhen agresorët.*

In which class is the student who bullied you?	GIRLS		BOYS		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
<b>I have not been a victim of bullying in the past months.</b>	180	44,3	229	51,3	409	47,9
<b>He/she has been in my class</b>	157	38,6	138	30,9	295	34,6
<b>In a class bigger than me</b>	20	4,9	37	8,3	57	6,7
<b>In a different class but from the same year</b>	27	6,6	25	5,6	52	6,1
<b>Both in a larger class and in a smaller class.</b>	20	4,9	15	3,4	35	4,1
<b>In a class smaller than me</b>	3	0,7	2	0,4	5	0,6
<b>Total</b>	<b>407</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>446</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>853</b>	<b>100</b>

### **Discussions**

Bullying is a public health problem that affects a large number of children. In various studies in other countries, bullying is considered a major concern for children's health (Holestein & Lynch, 2006). Based on the definition of

bullying, this study shows that a total of 42.3% of students from the sixth to the ninth grade have been involved in the phenomenon of bullying 2-3 times, or more times, from where: 12.9 % were only aggressors; 21.7% of them were victims and 7.7% were aggressor-victims. As we can see, these percentages match the countries with a high level of bullying, but this comparison should be taken with reservations, because it is not representative for the whole country, but only for the municipality of Tirana. The results of the study show that the phenomenon of bullying is very present and an integral part of lower secondary education in the city of Tirana. Despite the fact that the number of victims constitutes the minority of students involved in bullying (21.7%), this minority is thought to be essential, therefore, which has its weight and impact. It is also important to note that students who have expressed that they have been bullied "once or twice", constitute a sufficient number (24.2%), which requires protection, so that they do not become subjects of more serious attacks. harsh, despite the fact that researchers do not include them in the category of victims. This brings to attention that every school needs two separate policies: the one for the protection of children and the one for the prevention of bullying. Protection is required when, after bullying has occurred, there are appropriate measures to address the harm and distress caused. As we mentioned above, the study showed that 7.7% of all students in the sample of 853 students are both aggressors and victims, where boys are twice as likely to be included in the aggressor-victim category than girls, but both genders constitute a minority compared to other categories. This category of students requires special attention, as they experience both the socio-emotional problems of the victim and the problems of behavior as an aggressor (Nansel, 2003).

Consistently, researchers have discovered that aggressor-victims, especially boys of this category, can experience a lack of companionship in the classroom, loneliness, poor achievements in school results, that is, they are a group that have low grades in lessons, use more heavy drinkers and smokers, have poorer mental health and engage in more conflicts than other students (Stein, Dukes, & Warren, 2007). So, despite the small number of this category, looking at the problems and challenges that these children have to face, according to the researchers there is an urgent need to deal with such behaviors, as they harm not only the students themselves this category, but also the children they attack (Nansel et al., 2001). According to the researchers, it appears that the source of bullying among students is the failure to create a stable basis of communication and cooperation

between school authorities, students and parents, the lack of skills of teachers to manage conflicts, as well as their inability to have a good classroom performance.

#### *Forms of bullying by gender*

Studies have shown that there are clear differences between girls and boys both in terms of the intensity of their bullying and the different forms they experience or use to attack others (Boulton & Flemington, 2002; Nansel, et al 2001).

The study showed that in all classes girls are more victims of bullying than boys, while boys are more aggressors than girls, and this is consistent with other international studies. Where violence seems to be related to masculinity (being a man, with masculine/masculine character and physique) (Deliyanni, Sakka, & Koureta, 2005), as stated by Salmivalli (Salmivalli, 1996), there also aggression between boys is more idealized, which is a way of creating a social order, therefore their acceptance in the peer group often requires engaging in aggressive behavior.

As we have seen, the findings of this study are in line with other studies, showing that for both sexes, students are more victims of verbal bullying, where they are insulted, or given insulting nicknames, followed by emotional bullying, which includes spreading rumors and social exclusion. This predominance of ridicule, insults or the use of insulting nicknames can lead to or reinforce patterns of social exclusion, which then lead to loneliness, low self-esteem and health problems. Preadolescence and adolescence is the period where identity formation occurs, that is, it is the period when young people face significant challenges of creating and maintaining self-esteem, when they react to influences

external. This narrows the opportunities for the adolescent to grow and develop, as long as they think and feel that they must conform and follow, perhaps blindly, the goals, objectives, interests and norms of the group, if necessary. avoid aggressive behavior. Teasing is an activity that children engage in without realizing that they are causing bullying and without fully understanding the damage it is causing to their peers.

These forms present a challenge for schools because, in these cases, bullying is very difficult to identify, since it happens outside the eyes of teachers, but which is one of the forms that has many consequences for children (Richter, 2000; Seals & Young, 2003; Zindi, 1994). Likewise, if verbal bullying is the most common form of bullying for both girls and boys, Olweus (Olweus, 2010) observed that boys are generally victims of more violent and destructive bullying behavior than girls. Thus, they

experienced more physical bullying, which includes actions that cause physical harm, such as kicking, punching and slapping; taking money, lunch or homework, damaging other people's belongings (Selekman & Vessey, 2004). Meanwhile, girls try and prove to be hidden victims of bullying, where the spread of malicious rumors, manipulation of relationships and social exclusion are introduced (Selekman&Vessey et.al, 2004). This type of bullying is called instrumental/social bullying and is characterized by behaviors that try damage a child's friendships or his or her feelings by excluding him or her from the peer group (Crick & Grotmeter, 1995).

Data from this study revealed similar results to those mentioned above, with boys (17.4%) reporting being physically bullied (i.e., being hit, pushed, and locked in a room) more than girls. (12.0%). Even in the case of measuring the frequency of students who have been aggressors, boys try to use physical bullying more than girls, while the latter are more involved in verbal bullying and social exclusion than boys. In these cases, boys have a greater tendency to cause bullying. They have hit, kicked, pushed or locked in a student or several students" more compared to girls (respectively 15.3% of boys, against 2.9% of girls). Also, from a more in-depth analysis of possible gender differences made in this study, it turned out that when girls attack girls, they try to use more subtle forms, such as indirect bullying, which includes social exclusion and spreading rumors. . Whereas when boys attack other boys, they first use mainly verbal, physical and then exclusionary bullying.

But when attacking girls, boys mainly use verbal bullying, bullying in the form of spreading rumors and physical bullying. While exclusionary bullying is almost negligible. According to research done by Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist and Peltonen (Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist & Peltonen of the University of Miami, 1988), the tactics used by aggressive girls are distorted versions of some normal human development mechanisms, when girls attack others, they use behaviors such as alienation, isolation, premeditated exclusion, and spreading rumors to threaten peers.

Other researchers argue that girls are more involved in these forms of bullying because usually their interactions during this age are more physical, they develop feelings of intimacy and closeness more than boys, for example they hug, kiss and caress each other (Cotterell, 1996). ). These elements are very important because they make girls feel wanted and important. When bullying occurs, contact is lost, as the group of girls ignores, isolates, and excludes individuals, thereby hurting them more than

if they were physically attacked (Crick & Grapeth, 1995).

While boys give more importance to such qualities as physical strength and bravery, which are actually secondary qualities, while girls put them last. As it seems, these qualities of a manly nature give boys the opportunity to show themselves as adults, real men, while girls quickly understand that for them these qualities have superficial, external values (Dragoti, 2005). However, we can say that in all forms, it appears that boys have a greater tendency to cause bullying compared to girls. The literature indicates that this greater prevalence of bullying in boys may be because they need to build their dominance within the peer group. The easiest way to do this is by showing power, power (Baldray & Farrington, 1999). Since boys cause bullying more than girls, in them, the pressure is on them

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## **The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Work Practices of Social Workers in Albania. An Empirical Research Project with Survey and Semi-Structured Interviews**

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### **Abstract**

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic has had problematic implications for public and private public-facing services and has placed social workers on the front lines. Numerous research projects on social services in Italy during the pandemic describe the disorientation of social workers in the various dimensions of their work, environmental, relational, instrumental displacement, and organisational disorientation. After having analysed the characteristics and transformations of social services in Albania through an Erasmus Plus European Project entitled Towards Increased Awareness, Responsibility and Shared Quality in Social Work, which ended in 2021 and whose final phase was carried out during the pandemic, we thought it appropriate to study and highlight the pandemic's impact on the methods and rhythms of work of social workers in Albania. Since empirical studies on social workers in Albania are scarce, we carried out research that could bring together the views of members of this profession: we did so by means of a questionnaire survey administered by face-to-face interview to 70 social workers throughout Albania and semi-structured interviews with some social workers who also participated in the survey.

*Key words: Disorientation, Pandemic, Semi-structured Interviews, Social Workers, Survey.*



### Introduction<sup>3</sup>

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives of people and communities around the world and has affected not only the health sphere, but also the economic and social spheres, placing health and social service workers on the front lines.

Numerous researches (Sanfelici et al. 2020, Sanfelici 2020, Gregori and Perino 2020, Favretto et al 2021, Mascagni 2022) on social services in Italy during the pandemic describe the displacement of social workers in the various dimensions of their work. In particular, the study by Sanfelici et al (2020, p. 42-45) describes environmental displacement, relational displacement, instrumental displacement, and organisational displacement.

The subject of our study concerns the work of social workers in Albania in its various dimensions. The cognitive objectives are to determine the impact the pandemic has had on the work of social workers in terms of its relational, environmental, instrumental, and organisational dimensions and what lessons have been learned by social workers in innovative terms.

To find answers to the questions arising from the cognitive objectives, empirical research was carried out directly by questioning social service workers.

This research stems from a development of the results of the European project entitled *Towards Increased Awareness, Responsibility and Shared Quality in Social Work (T@sk)*<sup>4</sup>, which the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Florence was involved in as lead partner on the training of university teaching staff in the area of social work in Albania<sup>5</sup>.

The results of the T@sk Project revealed the characteristics of the Albanian social protection system, but also some critical issues concerning both the way in which legislation – which has undergone major reforms in recent

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<sup>3</sup> Although the paper is the result of agreed, joint work, Introduction is attributed to Giorgia Bulli and Giulia Mascagni, paragraph “The method” to Erika Cellini, paragraph “Results and discussion” to Eltona Tila, and Conclusions to Laura Bini and Raffaella Nurchis.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.taskproject.eu>. 585626-EPP-1-2017-1-IT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP

<sup>5</sup> The objectives of the T@sk Project were to increase the skills of university teaching staff in Albania and the professional growth of Albanian social workers and consequently to generate an improvement in social services. The University of Florence, the Complutense University of Madrid, the University of Lisbon, the Professional Order of Social Workers from the Tuscany Region, the University of Tirana, the University of Shkoder, and the University of Elbasan took part in the project.

years – is implemented and the training of social workers.

In light of the critical issues that have emerged and given that the T@sk Project found itself carrying out its activities during the first pandemic period, the research team from the University of Florence and the Professional Order of Social Workers felt it was important to follow up that project on its completion with an assessment of the situation of social services in Albania during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **The method**

The research was carried out during 2021-2022, but focuses on the early period of the pandemic, which was characterised by major restrictions.

The first phase of the research was carried out by means of a sample survey using a standardised questionnaire, in order to reach a large number of social workers. Because it was an exploratory and innovative research project, as there are no studies on social workers in Albania, we thought it would be interesting to be able to reach a significant number of people working in this profession.

The first part of the questionnaire is aimed at surveying professional profiles and characteristics of the social service organisation and the areas where social workers operate. The second part covers the way social workers operated and how they dealt with the initial period of the pandemic. The pandemic period was the core element through which we investigated the organisational dimension of the context and the social workers' own organisation as well as their workload and any innovations implemented by local authorities or NGOs to adapt to the new situation brought about by the pandemic. The questionnaire was sent to professors at Albanian universities<sup>6</sup> to obtain their essential views so that it could be validated by experienced professors. It was then amended based on their suggestions. The questionnaire consisted of 39 questions, four of which were open-ended and 35 closed-ended and was administered in the Albanian language.

The non-probabilistic sample consists of social workers working in Albanian territory. There is currently no official source in Albania that can provide a number or list of social workers in service. There is only the list

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<sup>6</sup> Professors Visar Dizdari and Bujane Topalli from the University of Shkoder, Professor Rudina Rama from the University of Tirana and Professor Eda Cela from the University of Elbasan. All teach in social work degree courses.

of social workers who applied for registration with the Professional Order of Social Workers in 2021 (624 persons)<sup>7</sup> - but these figures do not match those in service during the pandemic - and a 2015 study that refers to a workforce that is no longer current. We therefore decided to rely on a list of 250 people provided to us by the lecturers from the social work degree courses at Albanian universities already involved in the T@sk project.

Each of the 250 social workers was sent an email describing the research project and providing the link to the questionnaire. Because of the specific local nature of the research, the questionnaire was self-administered. It was therefore a websurvey using an online platform (Lombi, 2015).

The social workers who responded operated in all regions of Albania except Diber, a region from which we had no reference information. There were 70 responses received from 14 June to 1 September 2021. Although this is not a high percentage in relation to the total number of contacts (around 28%), we considered it more than sufficient, taking into account the level of representation for the largest regions – Elbasan, Tirana and Shkoder – which are the regions with the most services.

The second phase of the research was carried out through the administration of semi-structured interviews, in order to investigate the contributions from social workers, looking more deeply into some of the themes that emerged through the sample survey. The process also aimed to explore how professional practices are implemented within services, how social workers coped with the pandemic and how they represent themselves in the light of the establishment of the Professional Order.

Social workers who had participated in the sample survey were contacted by email to ask for interview availability. Ten social workers who operated in various regions, both in the public and private sector and with different responsibilities, made themselves available<sup>8</sup>. Finally, a member of the National Council of Social Workers was interviewed.

The interviews were conducted in Albanian, and then transcribed and translated into Italian. Transcribing an interview is not a neutral, straightforward operation, but implies a process of interpretation. Neither is it a simple act, as it refers to a complex process of communication between interviewer and interviewee in a given context. “Even in social research,

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7 Source: website of the Professional Order of Social Workers in Albania <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=192268880089186&set=a.161886876460720>, consulted on 18 February 2023.

8 The interviews were conducted remotely on the zoom platform and both audio and video were recorded.

the transcript is something crystallised, because it is not the dialogue between the actors in the interview, but merely a representation of that dialogue” (Diana and Montesperelli, 2005, 32). According to some authors, transcription represents a kind of ‘translation’ (ibid.). Just like any translation, it does not merely involve mechanically transferring content from one language into another, but is an interpretative task, a process of transforming the original text into something ‘equivalent’, but which is nonetheless new compared to the text produced by its author. Another process of interpretation was the translation from Albanian to Italian.

The analysis work was a process performed throughout the research: it started with the exploration of the subject matter, continued with the interaction with the interviewees and the comparison with the literature until a result was achieved, namely the representation of possible conceptual categories and professional practices, and thus a representation, and not ‘the representation’.

## **Results and discussion**

### ***The characteristics of the social workers studied and the services in which they work.***

As already noted, there are no official data on the number of social workers, or on how many operate in the public sector and NGOs and how many are present in urban and rural areas, or how many there are per region. To date, the only numerical references are the number of applications for registration with the Professional Order of Social Workers (624) and the number of positions for economic support and social service workers in Albania’s 61 municipalities (655), identified in the only study found, which dates back to 2015 and was carried out immediately after the administrative and geographical reforms of 2015, when Laws 121/2016, 18/2017 and 57/2019 had not yet been enacted<sup>9</sup>. Of those 655 individuals, 372 were university graduates, 203 had a higher secondary school diploma, two had a lower secondary school diploma and 27 did not indicate their qualifications. Of the graduates, only 70 had a degree in social work, psychology, or sociology, while 302 had a degree that was not in a relevant field (Infocip Study 2015, p. 9).

The sample of social workers who responded to the questionnaire are

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<sup>9</sup> Social Services Framework Law 121/2016, Child Protection Law 18/2017, and Economic Aid Law 57/2019.

young – most are aged between 25 and 39 years old – and are university graduates (65.7% replied that they have a university degree) and work in the public service (71% of respondents).

With regard to degree discipline, although a substantial number are graduates in social work, there are graduates in very different fields. Most replied that they were university graduates without specifying the field. Those with degrees in other disciplines work as social workers or social service managers in public bodies. To explain this situation, reference should be made to the historical context and the recent establishment of tertiary (university) education for social workers. One interesting element is the establishment of the first degree courses in social work. The first such course was introduced in September 1992 at the University of Tirana (Kalaja et al 2021). The first graduates in social work qualified in 1996, while the first NGOs had already arrived in Albania in the 1990s and were looking for social workers. As a result, there have been people who have pursued this profession, even without a suitable qualification. The other two degree courses at Albanian universities – those of Elbasan and Shkoder – were established in 2004 and 2005 respectively (ibid.), and this is a factor in the shortage of trained social workers in and around these cities.

The Professional Order of Social Workers was only established very recently and consequently the profession of social worker has not been regularised. The regularisation of the profession and the approval of recent legislation<sup>10</sup> bring hope for changes in the recruitment of professionals with appropriate academic training.

The respondents tend to have short-term experience: more than half have worked for less than five years, 30% have worked for between six and ten years, and only 15% have worked for between 11 and 15 years. The analysis of the data shows that at the time when the questionnaires were completed, the majority of people were working for local authorities and schools<sup>11</sup> and were located mainly in the regions of Elbasan, Shkoder, Tirana and Durres. Cross-referencing the data shows that those working in NGOs were predominantly located in the Shkoder region (8), followed by Elbasan (1) and Durres (1). NGOs offer day services for women who are victims of violence, disabled persons and trafficked minors. From the data emerging from Topalli (2020), it appears that the municipality of Shkoder

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<sup>10</sup> See the laws listed in footnote 7.

<sup>11</sup> In Albania, education is structured as follows: primary school (grade one to four), lower secondary school (grade five to nine), upper secondary school (grade one to three).

offers more public services than other municipalities, specifically Elbasan and Tirana, but it is also true that in the Shkoder region – again according to Topalli – there has been a significant presence of NGOs since the early 1990s. The information indicating that the NGO workers are mainly in Shkoder might reflect the contacts provided to us.

Since 2020 when the questionnaire was completed, 16 people have changed jobs, with most finding a new position in education. As can be inferred from the report by the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, there was a significant increase in 2021 in the number of social workers in the school psychosocial service<sup>12</sup>. They then changed employers while keeping the same job as a social worker. Only a couple of people started working as social workers after 2020. A total of 20% of the participants indicated *Other* without specifying a job title, but a cross-check of the data shows that four work in municipalities as managers, two in psychiatric hospitals (one as a social worker), two in schools (one as a social worker), and two in associations (one as a manager and the other as a social worker). Most work in an urban administrative unit<sup>13</sup>.

The study by Kalaja et al on the history of social services in Albania (2021) confirms that most services are concentrated in large municipalities. Although the social workers participating in the research project are distributed across almost all regions, most work in the regions of Elbasan (37.1%) and Shkoder (24.3%). The social workers who responded to the questionnaire work mainly in the areas of disability, child protection, and family and school violence. Only a very small percentage work in the area of integration of minorities, homelessness and health education. An important fact that emerges from the research is the prevalence of activities in residential and semi-residential facilities for people with different problems, including minors, the elderly, the disabled and women victims of violence. Only a minority (22.8%) declare that they work to support minors and women victims of violence, confirming the data found in the literature, namely that the services provided by the public and private sector (NGOs)

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12 Report 2021, National Strategy for Social Protection, Ministry of Health, and Social Protection website. In the 2018/2019 school year, there were 466 employees in the psychosocial service, of whom 158 were social workers, while in 2021, the number of social workers was 230, a significant increase due in part to Order 313/2020 enacted by the Minister of Education, which allowed for the recruitment of staff to strengthen psychosocial services in schools.

13 A distinction is made between urban and rural areas, as rural areas are difficult to reach and have few essential services.

are residential or semi-residential in nature. The data from the website of the State Social Service, which is responsible for checking and monitoring residential and semi-residential facilities, also confirm this representation. In its latest report (2021, p. 8), the Ministry of Health and Social Protection also indicates that approximately 63% of services are residential and semi-residential, 11% are home-based services and 10% are services in other areas, including local services.

### ***Professional practices***

In order to understand the professional practices of social workers, the project investigated the system of needs identification, assessment, management and monitoring based on the classical social services method (Campanini 2002, Fargion 2013).

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews reveals that the system of needs identification uses different paths. For schools, it is the psychosocial services, GPs and paediatricians provide guidance for people with disabilities, and there are groups of operators working on the street trying to make contact with exploited minors. The only direct point of access is the administrative unit<sup>14</sup>, which performs situational analysis and guidance functions.

As already stated, the Albanian social service seems to be structured with a focus on prevention, particularly with regard to minors, building awareness-raising services around them in order to prevent situations of need. This function cuts across all services operating in the country.

The system of services presented is based on the community social service model (Allegrì 2006), which promotes initiatives with the community and connects people and groups so that they can undertake actions that might be useful in addressing common problems and conflicts.

For those working in the public service, analysis of situations is carried out using standard forms approved by the relevant Ministries. These forms provide a template in which all aspects of the person's or family's life are noted. There is a clear intention to analyse and assess situations in terms of all possible dimensions, but methodological aspects and professional practices were not addressed in the narratives from social workers.

Multidisciplinary teamwork as required by the regulatory framework<sup>15</sup> is an

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<sup>14</sup> Administrative units are located throughout the municipalities, dealing with economic assistance, and providing social secretarial services.

<sup>15</sup>The Law on Gender Violence provides for the establishment of the Coordinated

important tool in the assistance process.

### ***The Professional Order of Workers and the Code of Ethics***

The social workers interviewed recognise the Professional Order of Social Workers as having a fundamental role. The interviews reveal a significant need for an organisation to represent professionals and the profession, to strengthen their identity, and to regulate the profession on an equal footing with others. This would benefit the community, which could then have access to higher quality services.

Respondents attribute a protective function to the Order. The member of the National Council of the Order believes that the Order is an instrument of protection to the outside world, but above all an institution to safeguard citizens.

Social workers hope that the recent establishment of the Order will strengthen social representation of the profession in terms of the three aspects mentioned by Allegri (2006): information, field, and attitude.

All the social workers asserted that the *information* aspect of the profession of social worker is lacking in quality and quantity. The social workers highlighted the lack of knowledge about the profession on the part of institutions and indicated that this is reflected among Albanian citizens. This indicates a lack of commitment on the part of the professional community to make itself known. The profession is little understood and consequently also undervalued. In their narratives, social workers point out how their profession is confused with others, in particular with that of psychologists. Thus, an unclear definition of the *field* of representation emerges. The *attitude*, as defined by Allegri (2006), does not seem positive, perhaps due to the lack of knowledge about the profession of social worker and the lesser recognition compared to the profession of psychologist.

Less importance is accorded, however, to the code of ethics and ethical conduct. The topic of professional conduct and ethics seems little known and irrelevant for some respondents, while it is important for others. The Code of Ethics and Conduct<sup>16</sup> was recently endorsed by the Professional Order of Social Workers and espouses the guidelines laid down in the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles, which was adopted in

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Reporting System, while the Child Protection Law envisages the establishment of the Inter-departmental Technical Group. Both are multidisciplinary teams involved in the support process. The social worker or local gender-based violence or child protection coordinators bring the teams together whenever necessary.  
16 <https://urdhriipunonjesvesociale.al/ligje-dhe-akte-nen-ligjore/> consulted on 20 February 2023.



2018 by the International Federation of Social Workers<sup>17</sup>.

The ethical dimension constitutes the foundation of professional conduct. Ethics is the area where the professional questions the meaning and value of the own professional actions and the motives and rules that guide those actions, which cannot be neutral precisely because they are driven by intentions (Filippini 2020).

### ***The impact of the pandemic***

The investigation focused on the transformations caused by the lockdown. As has also emerged from the literature, service delivery during the lockdown period was managed centrally, so as to meet the most urgent needs of citizens (Toto et al 2020). The State assumed the burden not only of identifying needs through local authorities but also of distributing basic necessities donated by NGOs, which did not contribute significantly in distribution activities. Social workers were on the front line, dealing with needs identification and emergency responses and managing the distribution of food and hygiene parcels to the more vulnerable sections of the population.

Not all services in which the social workers who participated in this survey were operating were able to remain open and thus continue their service provision on a regular basis: 43% of respondents reported that their services remained open, 37% reported that their services were partially open and 20% reported that their services were closed. Respondents highlighted that residential and semi-residential services were closed and decisions about whether to open were left to the discretion of the operator.

Most respondents worked on a face-to-face or partially face-to-face basis. Those working remotely worked for services that were closed, but there are a few individuals who worked remotely even though the service was open or partially open. There were four cases where operators worked on a face-to-base basis while the service was closed. At the time the questionnaire was completed, more than a year after the start of the pandemic, almost all social workers were working in face-to-face scenarios.

Most of the social workers stated that their work experienced slowdowns and difficulties during the pandemic, but this did not prevent them from working.

Social workers were asked to indicate whether the effect of the restrictions

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17<https://www.iassw-aiets.org/it/global-social-work-statement-of-ethical-principles-iassw/> consulted on 20 February 2023.

had an impact on people's use of services and how the institution and the work were organised. About half of the participants in the research project indicated that the effect of the restrictions had no impact. The number of people stating that the restrictive measures had a good or very good effect on the use of services was higher than the number stating that the measures had a very bad or bad effect. Cross-referencing of the data shows that the individuals in the latter category operated mainly in the Shkoder region (8) in the area of child protection and disabilities, followed by the Elbasan region, where they worked in schools (3), and then other regions such as Lezhë (1), Tirana (1), Berat (municipality of Dimal) (1) and Librazhd (1). Research carried out by World Vision (2020) during the lockdown, which analysed the needs of citizens, shows that a very large number of the households surveyed were unable to meet basic needs or find hygiene products. This suggests that the social workers in the sample responded to citizens with the tools and resources they had at their disposal, but it does not necessarily mean that citizens were able to access the services they needed. Half of the social workers expressed a positive opinion about the organisation of services by the institutions, whereas 13 individuals stated a negative opinion. A significant percentage remained neutral, and it seems that the health emergency situation did not affect how the institution was organised. The social workers probably felt that the organisation was good because 'the emergency imposed sudden, drastic reorganisations' that they were able to deal with (Sanfelici et al 2020, p. 45)<sup>18</sup>.

Social workers were asked to indicate whether the effect of the restrictions also impacted the quality of services. About half maintained a neutral stance: the quality of services neither improved nor worsened. However, it should be emphasised that many services in Albania still need to be improved or even structured in some areas (ILO 2021). The percentage of social workers stating that the quality of services was good or very good is twice as high as those stating the opposite. Social workers claiming that service quality had deteriorated operated primarily in residential services.

One element of particular interest is the responses on the innovations introduced by institutions during the pandemic. In fact, around 40% of the sample believed that restrictive measures have influenced the adoption of innovative methods, while only less than a quarter believed they have not. The semi-structured interviews reveal that the use of online platforms

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18 Prime Ministerial Decree No 236 of 19 March 2020 specifies the categories of people having access to the services provided by the social services within local authorities.

during the emergency period was perceived as an innovative method that reduced the social distancing in place and was therefore valuable for institutions and citizens.

In terms of work commitments, more than half experienced an increase in working hours, while 40% experienced no change. Conversely, the perception of work commitments and related fatigue increased for 71% of participants and remained unchanged for about 26%.

A total of 61% of the sample of social workers stated that the number of people using the service increased, 30% stated that the number of people using the service remained the same, and 9% that the number of people decreased. It is interesting to note that those individuals stating that the number of users has remained unchanged also stated that their perception of work commitment had increased, and for most working hours had also increased. This portion of the sample worked primarily in residential and semi-residential facilities for the disabled, minors or the elderly. This figure suggests that although the number of users did not increase, the management of users required more work. It should be noted that having to cope with an increased workload has led to the development of coping skills to the extent that they claim to be better organised.

According to the social workers based on their work experience, the factors that have led to an increase in the number of people contacting the services include economic problems, unemployment and violence in the family, but also the need for help in using mandatory online services during the periods of closure in March, April and May 2020.

During the semi-structured interviews, social workers identified two main types of difficulties experienced by citizens due to restrictions and which therefore led those citizens to use social protection services:

- Mental health-related difficulties: the literature mentions *pandemic fatigue*, recognised by the WHO as ‘*an expected and natural response to a prolonged public health crisis – not least because the severity and scale of the COVID-19 pandemic have called for the implementation of invasive measures with unprecedented impacts on the daily lives of everyone*’<sup>19</sup>.
- Absence of work and social security for those who have worked illegally.

The reasons leading to a decrease in the number of people using services were the change in the criteria for psychiatric admissions, which led to no new admissions, parents’ fear of their children becoming infected in

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19<https://www.centropsicologiamonza.it/psicoterapia/pandemic-fatigue-stanchezza-apatia-demotivazione-di-fronte-al-virus/> consulted on 23 February 2023.

residential services, problems with transporting children and curfew hours. In terms of the major difficulties that people encountered in using their services during the pandemic, social workers noted – in addition to the total closure or absence or limitation of services – the absence of public transport, social distancing, the restrictions on free movement, the criteria set by the Government for access to certain services and in particular mental health services, the rapid digitisation of procedures to access services, the lack of electronic tools or internet to access services, the precariousness of home-based services, delays in disability assessments by commissions, and fear of infection. Some social workers stated that they did not notice any difficulties in people's access to services.

With regard to safety in the workplace, almost all (87%) felt exposed to Covid-19 infection, despite the fact that 83% stated that they had protective equipment available against Covid-19 and 69% that they had been instructed or updated on Covid-19 disease prevention protocols. At the time when the questionnaires were administered, only 31% were vaccinated against Covid-19, a figure that reveals a lack of trust in vaccines.

With respect to the organisation of the social worker's work, the majority of respondents (about 46%) believe that the effect of the restrictions caused by the pandemic has acted positively or very positively on how their work is organised. Since the pandemic, about 70% of individuals have felt protected by the institution in relation to their activities and have had to organise their workspace in a different way.

Compared to the pre-Covid period, the possibility of reconciling work time and private time has not changed for 61.4% of the social workers in the sample, has worsened for 24.3% and has improved for 14.3%. The reasons for the deterioration in work/life balance are attributable to work overload, shift organisation, long hours, and psychological strain, having to keep family members at a distance to avoid possible contagion, increased workload and extended hours due to the duplication of in-person and remote work.

The emotions perceived during the pandemic were fear (33%), anxiety (17%) and loneliness (13%). Looking in detail at the social workers' experiences as recounted during the interviews, the words fear, stress and trauma were present in all the narratives, but the words conflict, anger, discontent, and serious situation also recurred.

The social workers in the sample described their professional experience during the pandemic using a few adjectives such as exhausting, unexpected, frustrating, but also challenging, stimulating, and interesting. In fact, the

social workers interviewed recounted that they had experienced the health emergency as professional growth, which, however, should have been preceded by specific training on the management of emergency situations, which does not exist in Albania.

## **Conclusions**

Social workers have a privileged position, as they stand at the intersection between micro- and macro-views if they are included in the thinking on a welfare system that protects the community (Sanfelici et al 2020). They have a better understanding of the conditions of vulnerable segments of the population and of the structural problems that produce vulnerability itself, which stems from an absence of protection from interpersonal networks and institutions capable of providing resources and goods to meet basic and relational needs. Precisely because of their position between the micro- and macro-dimensions, social workers have a vision not only of the problems but also of the resources of citizens and institutions and can make a crucial contribution to countering vulnerability, through policies and interventions that can reduce that phenomenon and increase the capacity to recognise the processes that create it.

While the experience of vulnerability is related to actual opportunities to access resources in the sense of material and relational resources required to cope with everyday life and critical events (Pastore 2020), the pandemic has particularly affected social groups that have fewer opportunities to access resources to protect themselves (Sanfelici et al 2020). The role of social workers in this period was therefore pivotal.

On the basis of the critical issues that emerged in the research and in view of the suggestions in the literature, it can be argued that it would be desirable on an organisational level to provide social protection services by personnel with appropriate academic training. It is hoped that the establishment of the Professional Order of Social Workers will be the last step in the lengthy process towards consolidating the profession in Albania. It will also be important to ensure compliance with Law 121/2016 – Article 36(4) lays down an obligation to provide a social worker for every 6,000-10,000 inhabitants, whereas about one third of Albanian municipalities still do not have a social service provision. It is just as important for the public service to be able to offer and plan essential services for citizens and not to leave these primarily to NGOs. As emerged from the interviews, the private social sector can be an opportunity that can complement, but not replace,

the public service.

The establishment of the Order should guarantee citizens the right to receive services from professionals registered with the Order and no longer from people with other qualifications. At the same time, it is desirable for social workers to have high-quality continuing education and for their work to be guided by the rules of conduct and ethical principles contained in the recently approved code of ethics.

With regard to professional aspects, it would be advisable to leave room for a method and professional practices that are capable of developing contextualised indicators, without falling back on a support process based on standardised forms defined in the various protocols. It would be interesting to explore the methodological dimension, which did not really emerge in this research project.

Supervision within the public social service would also be desirable, given the positive experience reported by the social worker who was supervised while working for an NGO.

The pandemic has had very negative effects on various aspects of people's lives, and social work more than ever needs to have the methodological tools and resources necessary to make its crucial contribution not only in emergencies, but in processes to mitigate vulnerability.

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## **Including the Social in the Individual. A Reflection About Groupwork Teaching Methodology in University Complutense of Madrid**

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### **Abstract**

In UCM Groupwork has been taught through experiential learning. Students form their own groups, choosing the topic and typology; and participate performing different roles: facilitator, observer and participant. After the Covid 19 pandemic the tendency is to carry out groups related to self-help and mutual aid with stress, self-esteem, personal development, and anxiety as the most common topics. It was observed that these issues are approached from an individual perspective, disregarding the increment in mental health problems of the society in general. The objective of the study is to analyse the manner students integrate (or not) the structural and social dimensions in their group experiences. The study is carried out through a qualitative methodology. The techniques include participant observation, content analysis of the students 'group chronicles and evaluation and group discussions. Results show that besides the difficulties for including the social and structural students highlight the importance of groupwork interaction and the sense of belonging to understand these problems from a collective perspective. Challenges and possibilities for including the social justice and find joint solutions against the tendency to individualise and medicalise problems are explained.

*Key words: Experiential Learning, Groupwork, Mental health, Social work education.*



## **Introduction**

The current teaching model in social work with groups at the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM, hereinafter) has its origin when the second author of this article first took over the teaching of the subject of social work with groups back in 2005, even before the major changes that the Bologna process would bring to university studies in Spain. Since then, it has evolved year after year, with the incorporation of new contributions by the rest of the authors as lecturers of the same and the contributions of the different readings and professional experiences that all of them have made and developed. Not in vain, one of the characteristics of the model is its experimental nature and its openness to new inputs from all the lecturers who are linked to it, once its basic principles have been assumed, which we will list later on.

The model is based on the “learning by doing” methodology, which it is not a novelty but it is still seen as innovative, especially at Higher Education (Williams, 2017). We start from the premise that the only way of learning to facilitate groups is by facilitating groups. Thus, students create a group that is meaningful to and relevant to their needs and experiences. The facilitator, observer and participant roles are rotated throughout the whole second semester within the same group.

In the last 2 years, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, the authors/professors observed a shift to topics and types of groups with an individual emphasis. In the previous years the topics were more oriented toward learning more deeply about social work topics; carrying out social change activities or improving social worker skills. In this presentation the objective is to reflect upon the following questions: Why are all the groups approaching apparently individual problems? How to include "the social" back into the subject?

In the first part of the text, the history and the subject methodology will be explained. Then, a brief introduction about mental health problems in youth will be explored to link the social and structural situation with the tendencies in the student’s group choices.

### ***Social Work with Groups teaching model at UCM***

Until 2005, social work with groups had been taught at UCM from a fundamentally psychological and therapeutic perspective. The theoretical contents taught were almost identical to those of the subjects of social psychology and group psychology. In the more practical part, the most

common references were to systemic models close to family therapy or to the psychosocial model of the Argentinean author Pichón Riviere (1980). In short, the School of Social Work at UCM did not teach social work with groups as such, but rather a social psychology of groups with some practical derivations, based fundamentally on the development of different group "dynamics" guided by fragmentary, punctual, sometimes improvised objectives, not directly linked to those of social intervention and action as such. And most importantly, work with groups was taught at a complete distance from the existing and internationally recognized tradition of social work with groups.

The incorporation of both the first and second editions of the International Standards for the Practice of Social Work with Groups as a basic guide for learning brought about a substantive change in teaching (IASWG, 1996, 2022). In the same way, the contents of social work began to be central in the theoretical part, giving the greatest possible prominence to the literature on groups produced in social work and by social workers. (E.g. Reid, 1981; Garvin 2003, 2005; Toseland et al. 2004; Toseland and Rivas, 2005). The construction of the curriculum under the guideline of these standards and nourished by this type of literature has allowed, among other aspects, the differential characterization of social work with groups, the emphasis on identity through a history of work with groups in social work or paying attention to the different models of practice in social work with groups, among other aspects. The search for practical references in the profession is also extremely important, despite the scarce tradition of the use of groups in Spanish social work, perhaps due to the long period of Franco's dictatorship (1936-1975), for which groups were anathema.

Beyond all this, the new UCM model has emphasized from the beginning the structural dimensions from which individual and collective problems emerge and in which they are maintained, the equal importance of the community and the individual and their respective idiosyncrasies, as well as the centrality of the group, as a capital axis for the description, analysis and evaluation, among equals, of the problems, needs and aspirations of its members, as well as to mobilize actions aimed at their response, solution or satisfaction. Our students hear us talk about the triple perspective that the social worker needs when facilitating groups. The individual, protagonist and beneficiary of the group service provision; the community as the framework in which the structural is articulated and expressed, but in which the resources for change will be found; and the group, the protagonist space of the action, facilitated by the professional, and of the mutual help of its

members. Mutual help is another of the fundamental pillars of the model. The model also underlines the expert role of the social worker, but not an expert in problems, needs or social resources, not an expert with a privileged vision, but an expert in facilitating the group process that meets with experts in their own lives in community frameworks endowed with meaning and full of their own significance. Facilitator of processes and facilitator of a space in which diversity is valued and respected, discrepancy as well as consensus, when they have to be produced, the possibility of having a different opinion on issues of value, but the most objective approach possible to hard facts (gender violence, poverty, child abuse), to be relativistic where it is necessary but as objective as possible when it is necessary, avoiding falling into the trap that everything, absolutely everything is constructed.

The UCM model is a materialistic model that avoids cognitive solutions. It defends that reality is normally unjust and forceful, but, at the same time, it maintains that it can be changed. However, this change does not only involve modifying our way of thinking about reality, but also having an impact on it, through resources, support, and individual and collective actions. In our research and teaching group we are not of those who think that everything is possible if one tries or wants it. Everything would be possible if collective processes were generated that would have an impact on the causes of injustice and inequality. Sometimes we have to make do with awareness and develop strategies to deal with difficult and complex situations.

Those interested in knowing in detail the basic principles on which our model is based, please consult Arias, González, Ducca and Brea (in press). They are summarized in the following eight: identity, open participation, innovation, ecology, diversity, democracy, symmetry, practice and evidence-based.

From the point of view of the curricular structure, the subject of work with groups is taught during the second year of the social work course, for a whole year and through two subjects: fundamentals of social work with groups and methodology of social work with groups. This has not been by choice, but derived from the structure of our degrees, which is similar in all studies taught in Spanish universities (four-month subjects of 6 ECTS).

Our courses aim at learning by doing, but we do not renounce to a rigorous theoretical training. We care about values, we give a lot of importance to ecological learning of skills, but we defend that a professional cannot be such if he/she does not have a solid theoretical basis that he/she maintains

through lifelong study.

We do not expect our students to know everything about social work with groups on the day of the exam and forget it immediately afterwards. Therefore, our programs are neither too broad nor too deep. We try to provide knowledge and develop basic skills that will last throughout their professional life. So that what they learn is not forgotten again. In addition, we do our utmost to develop attitudes that are in line with the principles of our model and those of the international standards (IASWG, 2022). We consider the values and attitudes of future professionals to be most important.

The following is a summary of what we indicate to our students on the first day of class in the two subjects referred to, as well as the competencies we intend them to acquire and the topics we develop. Also, and for both subjects, some issues related to our values on which we always emphasize, and which are related, as will be seen with the empirical part of this work that we present here.

In the Fundamentals of social work with groups we say that the course aims to provide the basic knowledge and the first practical experiences for students to be able to develop minimally in this level of intervention of Social Work. We emphasize that it is an introductory course that will have to be completed with new learning and contacts with the reality of social work with groups. The program responds both to the students' need to acquire a solid theoretical base on Social Work with Groups and to the development of the minimum skills and competences to be able to handle themselves adequately in a group environment.

The program presents an introduction to the knowledge of group composition, structure and processes that students will be able to develop in greater depth and put into practice in the other subject of work with groups in the degree of social work, called "Methodology of the Intervention in Social Work with Groups". However, its fundamental contents are focused on Social Work with Groups itself. In this sense, it is based on the idea that Social Work with Groups uses the group approach to achieve the objectives that are common to all Social Work.

The program explores, without opting for any of them, different theoretical approaches to Social Work with Groups. It presents, on the other hand, the main types of groups used in Social Work, as well as the different objectives they can serve and the peculiarities of the group process in each of them. All this, under the framework of the Standards for the Practice of Social Work with Groups of the IASWG.

The syllabus of the course is divided into 5 basic lessons: Social Work with Groups. Delimitation, definition, typology and characteristics; The historical development of Social Work with groups; The group and group dynamics; basic knowledge about composition, structure and group processes; Theoretical approaches and intervention models in Social Work with Groups; Basic skills and standards for the practice of Social Work with Groups.

In the subject of Methodology of intervention in Social Work with Groups we indicate to the students that it is the continuation of the subject "Fundamentals of Social Work with Groups". Also that in it, and starting from a presentation of the different areas of intervention in which social workers develop their professional activity, we intend to offer students the opportunity to live first-hand a group experience, deepen and apply theoretical knowledge on composition, structure and group processes and develop and improve their knowledge, skills and attitudes for planning, implementation, management and evaluation of a group.

And this is one of the keys to our teaching. That students have the opportunity to learn through a real practice of social work with groups. A real practice in which they themselves are the protagonists, since the initiatives they develop respond to their own needs as students and are carried out by them, taking turns with their classmates, since they all have, at least in two moments of the course, to assume the functions of group facilitators.

In this case, the topics that are developed, once the different areas of intervention have been covered and what evidence-based practice entails has been analyzed, go through the different stages that a group in social work goes through: planning, start-up, intermediate and final phase.

### ***The increment of mental health problems in society and specially among young people***

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and unprecedented impact on college students across various aspects of their lives. It has significantly affected their mental health, leading to challenges such as the transition to remote education, heightened stress and anxiety levels, disruptions to social and emotional well-being, and limited access to support resources. Several analyses were conducted to explore the sources of variability in both individual and collective mental health issues. These analyses aimed to identify factors such as socio-economic status, access to healthcare, social support networks, and environmental factors that contribute to the

occurrence and prevalence of mental health problems in different populations (Marques et al., 2021; Valiente et al., 2021; Wachtler et al., 2020).

## **Methods**

The problem analysed could only be approached through a qualitative methodology. Qualitative methodology allows a better approximation to the object of study. Padgett (2017) presents some characteristics of the qualitative methodology that helped us to choose the methodology. In the first place, she makes references to the “insider” perspective, validating the students and professors’ perspectives in the teaching- learning process. The people who study the processes are also part of those processes.

A person-centred approach is adopted, against a variable approach. We were more interested in the way the participants experienced the learning process. This holistic perspective allows the participants to include other aspects related to the context and the conjuncture in which the study takes place. This emphasis in the context can contribute to a deeper understanding of the problem studied.

In this sense, it is important to mention that the “situated perspective” will guide the research reflection. The situated perspective states that it is important to acknowledge that we get to know the reality from a position and that we, as researchers, must be aware of this positioning because it is not possible to know from nowhere (Sandoval, 2013).

The techniques have a twofold purpose: to discuss the main question of the article including students’ and professors’ perspectives and experiences as well to raise questions about the current social work training.

As we stated in the introduction this subject methodology has been taking place for more than 10 years, but it is after the pandemics that we observed a shift toward more “psychological aspects. The whole fieldwork took place during the second semester of the 2022/ 2023 course. Participant observation was performed by the first author during practice sessions. A content analysis of the students’ group chronicles and evaluation completed the material. The material was analysed to guide the reflection.

The groups analysed are formed by students of the second year of the Social Work Degree who already have finished the first semester subject “Fundamentals of Social Work with Groups”.

The groups were formed in the classroom in a random manner. They had to choose a topic, a type of group and present the planification to the whole

class. Two of the groups offered as volunteers for participating from a Service-Learning experience facilitating groups outside the classroom and developing a task group during the class time.

In the following table (Table1) there is a description of the groups (purpose and content).

*Table 1: Group purpose and content (Own elaboration)*

<b>Name of the group</b>	<b>N°</b>	<b>Group purpose</b>	<b>Content</b>
Social Girls	8	Personal wellbeing	Empathy, emotions, anxiety, stress, affective responsibility
We are Waters		Emotional wellbeing	Emotional management, anxiety, affective responsibility
Residencia de Mayores	6	Service Learning: older adults with Alzheimer	Active aging, reminiscence
Escuela de español para inmigrantes	6	Service Learning: groupwork activities for social inclusion	Communication practice, social inclusion, discrimination
Blessed by the witches	8	Reduce anxiety	Sharing and expressing feelings, "the future", mutual aid
Personal Development	9	Learn to manage emotions	Emotion identification, beauty standards, implication of emotions for social workers, empathy
ActivArte	8	Learn non deliberative techniques for groupwork	Nondeliberative techniques for working with vulnerable groups: theatre, painting, writing, mindfulness, photography, song writing, cloth customization, and dancing.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results can be divided into three main headlines: the choice of the topic and the kind of groups; the methodology as a manner to introduce a social justice perspective; and the importance of Service Learning.

Students, while choosing the topics and types of groups demonstrated a shift to apparently individual aspects. At the beginning, this was discussed in our research group meetings since it was very shocking since it shown that there was a need to talk and discussed mental health issue. We could find the main reason for this tendency in the current mental health public problem.

Nowadays, there is a tendency to medicalise and catalogue as "mental

health problems” situations that in the past were considered part of the life course. The increment of the mental health diagnosis, together with a greater importance of the pharmaceutical industry led to an understanding of what is considered mental health problems as something that has to do with the individual (Ortiz Lobo, 2008).

The consumption of anxiolytics and antidepressants - psychotropic drugs - has grown by more than 27% since 2010. Antidepressants are the only drug that has grown steadily since that date. Furthermore, for the second consecutive year and according to the UN International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), Spain is the country in the world with the highest consumption rate of benzodiazepines -included within anxiolytics, such as alprazolam, diazepam, or lorazepam-, after analysing data from 90 countries.

It is very hard, with this scenario, to make the social work with groups perspective possible. However, as teachers, we feel responsible for the youth and believe that reflecting upon this is a first step for a social change. Trying to be loyal with the spirit of the teaching methodology we had to keep the freedom of choice of topics and try to create spaces for reflection and inclusion of the social justice perspective. Alba, one of the students express it in this manner:

*“We have learned techniques and ways to overcome moments of crisis, for which the session on anxiety has been very useful. The rest of the sessions have made me feel understood and respected, especially because the members of the group shared aspects with me that, before they were discussed, I thought were not common and only belonged to me”* (Alba, Self-Development Group)

This leads to the following important issue: how the methodology helped to include the social justice perspective. According to the students, four main activities helped to include the social justice perspective. In the first place, we included reading material that included the social justice perspective in social work with groups. For example, Hays et al. (2010); Singh and Salazar (2010); Trevithick (2012) reflected upon the manner in which the social justice perspective could be included. Though during the evaluation students reported that they did not want to read “that much”, they included some of the reading concepts in their reflections.

Secondly, a theory and practice integration guided the whole subject. Thus, theoretical sessions included examples of the observations led in the group and other groups from society. Each group had in every session one or two moments with the professor in order to reflect not only about facilitator



skills, but also content, and this theory and practice integration. This year, feedback sessions were included in the theoretical sessions, in which material from the reflective chronicles was analysed.

This “learning by doing” methodology contributed to creating spaces for mutual aid and group cohesion. We can illustrate this point with an example of a supervision intervention. One of the facilitators of a small group was explaining an activity that was too long. She was asked to reflect upon the duration and methodology of the activity. The other members of the group said that they were going to help her to do the activity in a faster manner, that they were going to enjoy the activity pretty much. The group was about emotional development and they were clearly helping their mater by showing her their support. We can continue this illustration with the following extract from a reflection:

*The evolution of the group has been increasing positively during all the sessions respectively, adjusting the content with the initial, intermediate and final phases. Both in terms of content and in terms of confidence and group cohesion, we have considered that it has progressively evolved favourably. All participants agree that the group has been very useful to address social skills in a broader and more practical way, and that, therefore, we will use them both in the present personal and professional social skills in the future. (Social Girls, Group reflection)*

During the teaching planning, we expected that the groups who did Service Learning were going to have a better understanding of how to include the social justice perspective. However, during the supervision sessions it was necessary to raise questions that made them think and reflect on the social issues that framed their intervention.

At the same time, the students reported that they could integrate theory and practice because they were facilitating groups for other people. They were invited to look for information about other groupwork experiences and research in order to adapt the findings to their needs.

*“However, on an academic level, it has allowed us to clarify what was explained theoretically in class. Having the opportunity to put this knowledge into practice has made it easier to understand and acquire the learning that was required of us.*

*In terms of experience for the future professional, we consider it a first contact with the reality, since intervening with real experiences and people allows us to acquire knowledge that cannot be obtained theoretically in a class. (Residencia Reina Sofía Group Reflection)*

Motivation was higher in these groups at the beginning, but along with the

group development all the groups manifested being very interested in the subject. Attendance was almost perfect in all the groups through the subject.

### **Conclusions**

We can conclude that the methodology contributes to reflection on the increasing individualisation of social problems and allows the inclusion of the social and structural perspectives. "Learning by doing" promotes a greater reflection in action.

The subject has been positively evaluated by students, valuing mostly the social understanding of individual problems and the mutual aid and cohesion processes they experienced. Most of the groups referred to the structural perspective in their work, what is an indicator of this inclusion.

However, some limitations were identified. In the first place, the semester is not long enough to allow students to facilitate more than one session and some group processes might need more time to occur. The other important problem is that the basic concepts must be acquired in the previous course, which can be difficult if not all the professors follow the same perspective and theoretical framework.

There are also some aspects for improvement, such as a better theoretical-practical interrelationship, especially with the readings that inform an evidence-based practice; or a better manner for supervision that do not interrupt the group flow.

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## **Implementation of Ict Standards in Subject Programs**

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### **Abstract**

In the debate about the role of technology on learning, the question of whether ICT exerts a positive influence, or how important this influence is, remains an open issue for debate and empirical verification. This study analyzes the implementation of digital learning technology during the didactic processing of knowledge in the teaching and learning process and precisely if the teaching model reflects the standards of the learning process based on the 9-year schools of the city of Gjirokastër. The analysis is based on data collected from ninth grade students, teachers, school principals, in the schools of Gjirokastra. The data contains information from schools in urban areas for the period 2022, after the introduction of ICT, the degree of knowledge and use of technology by students and teachers, as well as the degree and quality of the introduction of technological infrastructure in schools and learning. In this paper, we will analyze how the packages of standards designed for educational institutions in order to facilitate and enable the integration of technology in subject programs, find application or not in the teaching and learning process.

The analysis shows that the city's schools have problems with the quality of the technological infrastructure, with the level of knowledge and use of ICT, the relationships that ICT builds between them, the Teacher and the Student, as well as with the teaching model. The analysis finds that schools should work harder to implement technology standards in the learning process.

*Key words: Learning Through ICT, Technological Knowledge, Use of ICT, Standards.*

## **Introduction**

Directing the learning process by basing learning on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) is widespread at all levels of the education system. With the changes that occur in society, new needs appear, technological innovations become common, new development strategies are needed, etc. The educational system must try to maintain these changes with internal quantitative and qualitative developments, with appropriate values and attitudes. Under these conditions, the need for curriculum changes adapted to competencies constitutes the essence of educational reforms in general and curriculum reforms in particular. All countries are now creating policies that include the use of ICT in education. Most countries have issued instructions on how ICT will play a role in improving the education system (Kozma 2003). Thus, the use of ICT is becoming an important part of educational curricula and programs as well as educational policies (Wong, Li, Choi, & Lee, 2008)

The study presents the essential elements on which the curriculum of pre-university education is based in LSE education in the district of Gjirokastra. The purpose of the study is to identify the level of digital implementation at LSE.

## **Methodology**

The analysis is based on data collected from ninth grade students, teachers, school principals, in the schools of Gjirokastra. The data contains information from schools in urban areas for the period 2022, after the introduction of ICT, the degree of knowledge and use of technology by students and teachers, as well as the degree and quality of the introduction of technological infrastructure in schools and learning. To draw successful conclusions regarding the acquisition of digital competences by lower secondary school students (LSEs), we rely on the results of the statistical processing of data collected by polling 50 teachers of the 9-year primary education schools in the district of Gjirokastra.

The questionnaire that the teachers were asked to fill in contained questions that represented the indicators of digital competences. The quantification of these indicators was made possible through Likert scale: Not at all, Little, A little, Sufficient, Well and Very Well. Data processing was done using SPSS v.21 software as well as Microsoft Excel. The study included urban and rural school teachers.

This study analyzes those ambiguities in the curriculum that are waiting to be resolved by its authors. In order to draw the most realistic conclusions about the acquisition of digital competences by students of lower secondary schools (LSE), we used the results of statistical processing of data collected from the survey of 50 teachers of the 9-year-old primary school of the district . of Gjirokastra. The questionnaire that the teachers were asked to complete contained questions representing indicators of digital competences. The quantification of these indicators was made possible through the Likert scale: not at all, a little, a little, sufficiently, well and very well. Data processing was done using SPSS v.21 software as well as Microsoft Excel. Teachers from urban and rural schools were included in the study.

The conducting of the teaching process by basing learning on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) is widespread in all levels of the education system. With changes that take place in society, new needs emerge, technological innovation become commonplace, new development strategies are needed etc. The education system must try to keep up with these changes with internal quantitative and qualitative developments, adequate values and attitudes. Under these conditions, the need for curriculum changes geared to competences constitutes the core of educational reforms in general and curriculum reforms in particular.

One of the needs for change in the school context is Integration in the Digital Age. Therefore, one of the goals of pre-university education for students was for them to use new technologies. These changes imply the necessity of mastering the competences that enable individuals to manage the changes and new situations. In line with the goals of pre-university education, our schools now operate based on 7 competences:

1. Communication and expression competence;
2. Thinking competence;
3. Learning how to learn competence;
4. Competence for life, entrepreneurship and the environment;
5. Personal competence;
6. Citizenship competence.
7. Digital Competence

The purpose of our study is to identify the level of implementation of one of these computations and concretely that of the digital competences in LSE.

The reasons for this are: academic and practical

➤ *From the academic standpoint, studying is intriguing for three reasons.*

1. Need for a better explanation of the problems observed in learning and the variety of the perspectives “viewpoints” .

a) *The socio-economic viewpoint* sees the problems as related to politics, culture and attitude towards innovation, or economic development (Frutos 2003).

b) *The institutional viewpoint* links learning problems to the changes and institutional structure of educational institutions, policies and financial resources. Mooij & Smeets (2001), Waller & Foster (2000), Crawford (1997, 1999), Cullen & Jones (2003), etc.

c) *The technological viewpoint* sees, analyzes and relates learning problems to the level and availability of technological infrastructure Richardson (1997), Ely (1999), Talamo & Ligorio & Simons (2003), Duarte & Brink (2003).

d) *Pedagogical and psychological viewpoint* considers the learning problems as related to the teacher and student Chi & Glaser & Ress (1982), Bruer (1992), Hatano & Inagaki (1992), Veen (1995), Brummelhuis (1995), etc.

The existence of this diversity of perspectives is a reason that makes the study of the level and implementation of the digital competences in LSE intriguing.

2. The diversity of factors with which learning is connected and the debate scholars are having. A point of contention among scholars is that, based on their take on the matter they emphasize the influential role of various factors.

3. Issues that remain open to debate among scholars and the theses developed.

a) *the technological viewpoint* defends the idea that ICT represents a factor of positive influence and the extent and quality of learning increases with the introduction and application of ICT in teaching (Hakkarainen & Ilomaiki & Lipponen & Muukkonen & Rahikainen & Tuominen & Lakkala & Lehtinen 2000: 103),

b) *Pedagogical and psychological viewpoints* acknowledge that ICT is important, but consider its role and effectiveness dependent on the skills and the extent to which it is used by the teacher and the student, pedagogy and teaching objectives, or the relationship between teacher and student (Chi & Glaser & Ress 1982: 1-75, Bruer 1992, Hatano & Inagaki 1992: 115-133, Scardamalia & Bereiter 1994: 265-283), etc.

c) *Institutional and socio-economic viewpoints* adhere to the thesis that ICT is important but its role and extent of influence depend on policies and situations rather than the know-how and its use by teachers or students (Barajas 2003: 9-14, Cullen & Jones 2003: 47-68, Owen 2003: 69-84).

➤ *From a practical viewpoint, the study of the quality of learning through ICT is important:*

1. First, it is related to the importance and impact it has on the individual, human resources and the economy of a society (Hakkarainen & Ilomaiki & Lipponen & Muukkonen & Rahikainen & Tuominen & Lakkala & Lehtinen 2000: 103-117

2. Second, it is important for the quality of education policies that focus on and deal with actors directly related to the learning process (Cullen & Jones 2003: 47-68).

3. Today, ICT is increasingly used in all levels of the education system (OECD 1996, Sinko & Lehtinen 1999, Maier & Win 2000, Mooij & Smeets 2001, Haddad 2001) etc.,

4. But there are also problems, not all schools manifest the same results and tendencies in proportion to the quality of learning. (Johnson, Cox, Watson 1994, Mc Dougall 2001, Harrison, Comber, Fisher, Somekth, and Watling 2002 Dougall 2005, Abbott, Bella, Blakeley, Beauchamp, Rhodes 2003)

This study believes that:

1. there is a close and positive relationship between *ICT and learning*. This study builds on the belief that the introduction of ICT in the teaching process helps both the student and the quality of the teaching process.

2. between *ICT and teacher* there is a close and important relationship related to learning. The study builds on the belief that the introduction of ICT in the teaching process positively affects the outcomes and quality of learning.

3. Between *ICT and student* there is an important relationship for learning. This study builds on the belief that encouraging students to use technology represents a very important premise for improving the level and learning outcomes.

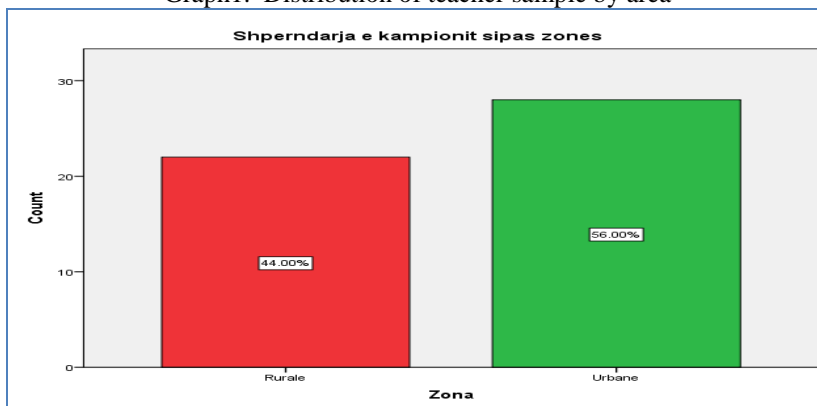
4. *the relationship between ICT, teachers and students* cannot be seen as separate from one another but interdependent.

### **Case study:**

Representation of teachers in the selected sample by area was 44% for rural areas and 56% for urban areas (Graph 1).



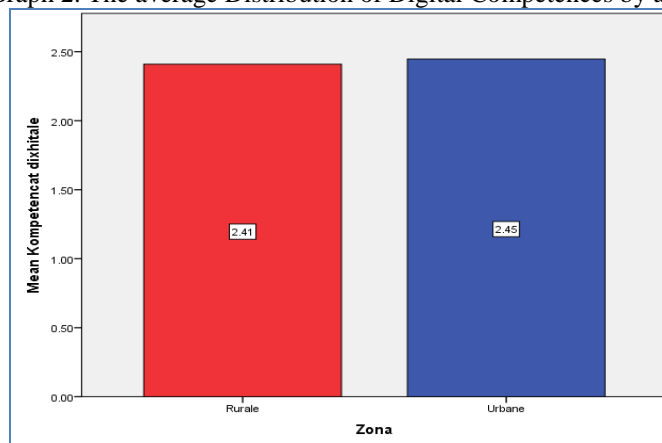
Graph1. Distribution of teacher sample by area



Processing and graphical presentation (graph 2) of the data showed that the overall level of acquisition of digital competences by pupils of the 9-year primary education schools of the city (urban area) is almost at the same level as their acquisition by the village school pupils (rural areas).

The average level observed in the urban area is 2.45 according to an estimate from 1 to 5 according to Likert scale, whereas in the rural area this average is 2.41. *What is important for both areas is that in both areas rural and urban, the level of acquisition of digital competences is below the average level 3, a value which according to Likert scale means Sufficient. Put otherwise, in general, in the schools the level of acquisition of digital competencies is not enough.*

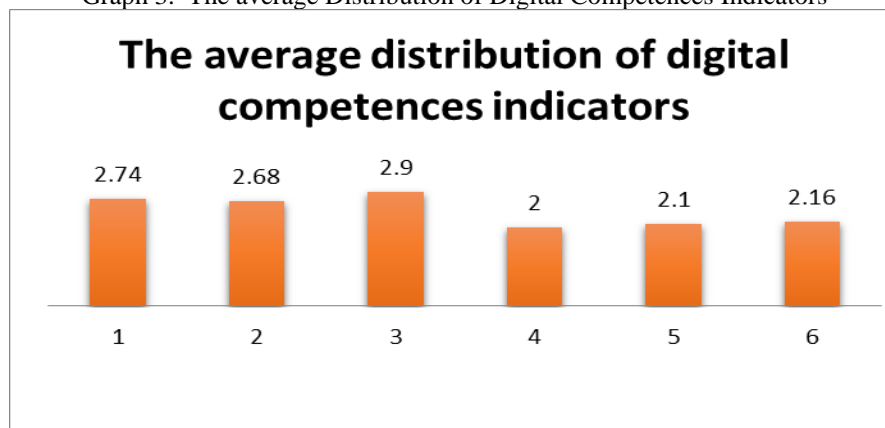
Graph 2. The average Distribution of Digital Competences by area



The average level of Digital Competence is the result of the level of 6 indicators of this competence: 1-level of use of computer applications; 2-

the level of collection and processing of information accessible by ICT; 3- the level of risk assessment coming from the Internet or ICT; 4-level of the ability to use the ethical and legal principles of interactive ICT use; 5-the level of ICT use to develop critical and creative thinking; 6-level of identification, analysis and use of problem-solving systems.

Graph 3. The average Distribution of Digital Competences Indicators



From Graph 3, we can see that *all indicators that determine the level of digital competences acquisition have an average observed below the level (3 = Sufficient). So none of these indicators are at a sufficient level of perception.*

The indicator with the highest average is 3 (the level of risk assessment coming from the Internet or ICT). This average is at the level of 2.9 according to the Likert scale, which is roughly equal to 3, which means that according to teachers' perception, pupils are quite capable to evaluate the risks coming from the use of the Internet. *But the low average level of the fourth indicator, which is only 2 units and corresponds to the "Little" level, indicates that despite the fact that the pupils are quite capable to assess the risks, they lack the ability to use ethical and legal principles of interactive ICT use.*

The 2.1 and 2.16 values of the averages for Indicators 5 (the level of ICT use to develop critical and creative thinking) and 6 (the level of identification, analysis and use of problem-solving systems) shows that *students are not sufficiently capable to use ICT both in terms of developing a critical and creative thinking, as well as to use ICT for solving problem situations with the help of computer applications. This conclusion is reinforced even further by the indicators of Table 4, in which we see that*

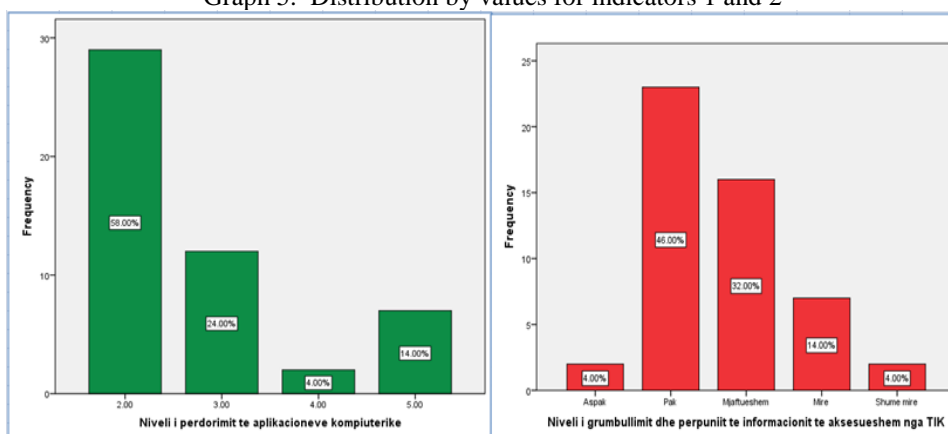
mode (the value observed more times) is minimal for the last three indicators of Digital Competences.

Table 4. Statistical Results of Digital Competences Indicators

Statistics		X_7_1	X_7_2	X_7_3	X_7_4	X_7_5	X_7_6
N	Valid	50	50	50	50	50	50
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		2.7400	2.6800	2.9000	2.0000	2.1000	2.1600
Mode		2.00	2.00	3.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Std. Deviation		1.06541	.91339	.61445	1.01015	1.16496	1.16689
	25	2.0000	2.0000	2.7500	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
Percentiles	50	2.0000	2.5000	3.0000	2.0000	2.0000	2.0000
	75	3.0000	3.0000	3.0000	3.0000	3.0000	3.0000

Given that the indicators of the assessment of the level of acquisition of digital competences show different individual qualities, we have made a statistical processing of their individual data.

Graph 5. Distribution by values for indicators 1 and 2

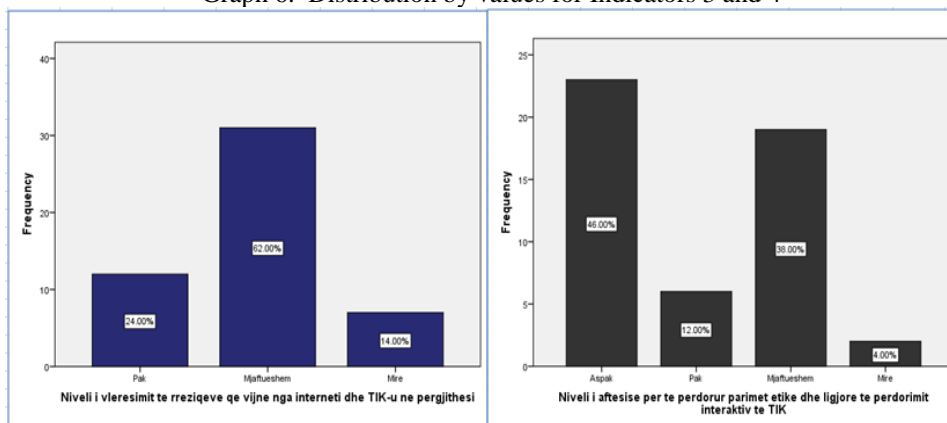


In Graph 5 we see that the level of pupils who use computer applications is concentrated at 58% at the "Little" level, 24% are concentrated at the "Sufficient" level and only 18% are concentrated at "Well" and "Very well". As we see, the "At all" level regarding the use of computer applications by

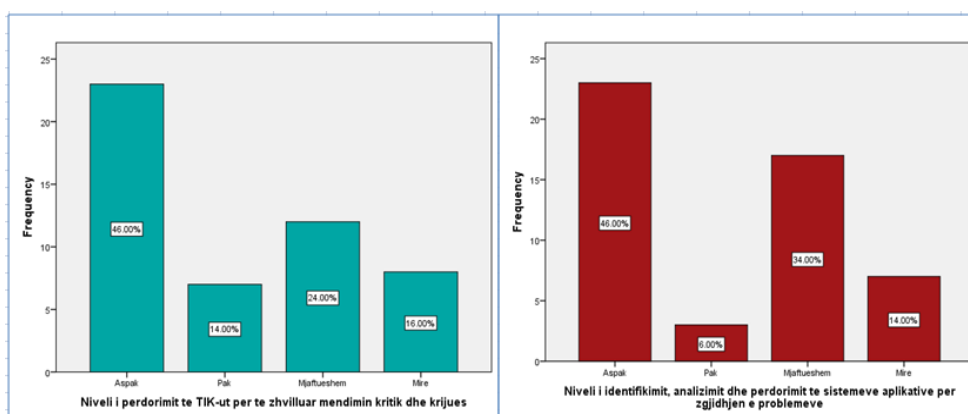
the students does not exist. Regarding the collection and processing of information accessible by ICT, we see that the majority of pupils (about 46%) are "A little" capable of achieving this. 32% of pupils have a "Sufficient" ability and only 18% of them are "Well" and "Very well" able to collect and process information received through ICT. For this indicator we see that although at a low level (4%), there are still pupils who are not able "At all" to collect and process information through ICT.

Regarding the ability to identify and evaluate the risks coming from ICT use, in the histogram on the right of Histogram 6, we see that most of the pupils (62%) are able to identify these risks, but only 14% of them are at the "Well" level and none is at the "Very well" level. 24% are able to evaluate at the "A Little" level and none at the "Not at all" level. Interestingly, the result observed for the fourth indicator which shows that almost half of the students (46%) are not able "At all" to use the ethical and legal principles of ICT. 38% of them use them sufficiently and only 4% are able to use them at "Well" level.

Graph 6. Distribution by values for Indicators 3 and 4



The last two indicators have a distribution of concentrations of the same configuration where the "Not at all" level prevails for both of these indicators, at 46%. In none of these indicators did we observe the "Very well" level of use of ICT in the development of critical and creative thinking as well as in resolving problem situations through it. In the case of indicator 5, the level "Sufficient" is seen at 24%, whereas the indicator 6 is at in 34%.



Graph 7. Distribution by values for indicators 5 and 6

## Conclusions

- What is important for both areas is that the level of digital competences acquisition is below the average level (3), which corresponds to the "Sufficient" level in the rating scale.
- In schools, the level of acquisition of digital skills is not satisfactory.
- All indicators that determine the level of digital competences acquisition have an observed average below the possible average level (3 = Sufficient). So none of these indicators appear to be at a sufficient level of perception.
- But the low level of the average for the fourth indicator, which is only 2 units and corresponds to the "Little" level, indicates that despite the fact that students are sufficiently capable of assessing risks, they lack the ability to use ethical and legal principles of the interactive use of ICT.
- The study shows that pupils schools are still insufficiently capable of using ICT both in terms of developing critical and creative thinking and of using it to solve problem situations with the help of computer applications.

## Recommendations

- The level of acquisition of digital competences in schools should be above the sufficient level.
- Schools and teachers should work as hard as possible to acquire digital skills.
- The ability to use ethical and legal principles increases. of the interactive use of ICT.
- Students use ICT both in terms of developing critical and creative thinking and to use it to solve problem situations.

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## **Review and Analysis of the Curriculum of Study Bachelor in “Social Work” at the University of Shkoder**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to present the results of a review and analysis of the bachelor program in “Social work” curriculum of studies at the University of Shkoder “Luigj Gurakuqi”. These analysis were part of a wider study undertaken in the frame of the project “Increasing the capacities of social workers in service and enhancing the education in Social Work in Albania” (implemented by DSWSP, University of Tirana and funded by UNICEF – Albania), one of which objectives was to provide a comprehensive review of the existing curricula in Social Work Education in the three public Albanian universities, Tirana, Shkoder and Elbasan, in order to know the level of knowledge they offered about social services. More specifically, the review of the curriculum of studies in Social Work intended to define the level of inclusion of social services in Albania; their organization; the roles and responsibilities about planning, budgeting, monitoring, and evaluating aspects of social services at national and local level. Another objective was to understand the level of knowledge and practical skills the students receive relating to social services. The methodology used was a curriculum content review, aiming to identify if the theoretical knowledge about the functioning of social services, is included in the study program and in the different syllabi. The analysis included the review of 10 courses and their syllabi of the study program Bachelor in Social work 2019 – 2022. Main findings are that, despite the plan of study does not have a specific course entitled to exclusively treat social services at national and local level, there are courses related to different aspects of social services. The inclusion of such aspects is seen

especially in characterized formation subjects. It is during the second and the third years of study the students take deep knowledge about the organization and the functioning of social services at national level. And, mainly in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year students see, through internship in institutions, how social services are organized in the local level, Municipality of Shkoder and in other municipalities in north Albania. Finally, we suggest changes in the curriculum of study and the syllabi of the Bachelor degree in “Social Work” at the University of Shkoder for a better inclusion and the improvement of the level of knowledge and practical skills on social services.

*Key words: Social Work Education, Curriculum content review, Social services, Shkoder.*

### **Introduction**

The social work profession is a relatively new profession in Albania, as well in other East European and Eurasian countries. During the communist era, social problems were not recognized or were minimized in the region. With the process of democratization of these societies, social sector reforms have taken root, so has an increased awareness that a well-trained social work workforce is key to the creation of an effective system of social services (USAID, 2008)

According to the definition approved in 2014 by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW), the social work profession “Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work” (IASSW and IFSW, 2014). By definition, social workers are a key component of modern social service provision, thereby the importance of including aspects of social service organization in social work higher education.

Referring to global standards for the education and training of the social work profession (domain of the Social Work Profession), in respect of core curricula, schools should aspire toward “knowledge of social welfare policies (or lack thereof), services and laws at local, national and/or regional/international levels, and the roles of social work in policy planning, implementation, evaluation and in social change processes” (IASSW and IFSW, 2004).

The education in social work is recent in Albania, starting in concomitance



with the process of democratization, the economic and social reforms. In the social field, the government began to address growing social problems by creating a legislative framework for new services. It was recognized that the quality of these services was largely dependent on “skilled social workers with a new philosophy.” Thus, the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, assisted by a U.S. university, started in the University of Tirana (UT) the Faculty of Social Sciences in 1992 (Van Hook, et al., 2006).

Since the graduation of the first generation of social workers in UT completing four years program in the period 1992-1996 the social work education and curricula has been subjected to several changes, adjustments, and improvements to address the dynamics of social protection reforms and the changings in higher education system regulations in Albania.

In 2005 the Albania High Education Institution was made part of the Bologna Declaration and the Department of Social Work (UT) adapted the curricula based in Bologna standards. As results the curricula shifted from four to three years, followed by one year Master of Arts or two years Master of Sciences (Rama et al., 2020). In these years two other social work programs were established, in public universities of Elbasan, and Shkoder.

The study program of the first cycle “Bachelor’s Degree in Social Work” in the University of Elbasan (UEL) was established in 2005 with the approval of the Ministry of Education and Science, organized as a program aimed at preparing general specialists for the practice of social work, social policy and social administration (Topi, et al., 2020). The program of study “bachelor’s degree in social work” at the University of Shkoder “Luigj Gurakuqi” (USH) was opened for the first time in the academic year 2005-2006 based on the decision of the Senate of the University. Opening this social work program emerged as a need of the Shkoder region, and beyond the entire North Albania, to have genuine specialists in social services (Dizdari, et al., 2020).

From 2008 to 2010 (UT) and from 2010 to 2014 (UEL) the departments of social work were engaged in establishing a wide range of master programs in response to Bologna system and market demands for qualified social service practitioners. During the first years of offering these programs, the curriculum has undergone constant changes, but the biggest changes in the curriculum took place in 2015 with the entry into force of the Law on Education, based on Articles 72 and 75 on the organization of study programs (Law No. 80/2015).

Recently the social care system in Albania has undergone a major reform with the approval in 2016 of the Law “On Social Care Services in Albania”, which reform is necessary to be reflected in the curricula of different levels of study program in social work.

In this frame the project “Increasing the capacities of social workers in service and enhancing the education in Social Work in Albania”, funded by UNICEF – Albania, and implemented by the Department of Social Work and Social Policy (UT) has foreseen as one of its components a review of the existing curricula in social work education in Albania. More specifically, the review of the curriculum of studies in Social Work intended to define the level of inclusion of social services in Albania; their organization; the roles and responsibilities about planning, budgeting, monitoring, and evaluating aspects of social services at national and local level. Another objective was to understand the level of knowledge and practical skills the students receive relating to social services.

In this paper, as part of the study group, we will present the results of the review and analysis of the curriculum of study bachelor in “Social work” at the University of Shkoder “Luigj Gurakuqi”.

First, we will present some background information about the social work education program at the USH and the structure responsible for this program, the Department of Psychology and Social work. Then we will continue with the presentation of the procedures used, in the methodological section. The main findings and a discussion about them will appear in the section result and discussion. Finally, we will present our conclusions about the review of the curriculum of study and of the syllabi and give our recommendations for the improvement of the level of knowledge and practical skills on social care provision.

### ***Background information on the Social Work education at the USH***

The program of study in “Social Work” at the University of Shkoder “Luigj Gurakuqi” was opened for the first time in the academic year 2005 – 2006. The structure responsible for the program was the Department of Pedagogy - Psychology at Faculty of Educational Sciences.

In the 2009 the Department of Psychology – Social Work, responsible for the program in Social Work, was created as result of the approval of the new organizational structure of the Faculty of Educational Sciences that sanctioned the division of the former Department of Pedagogy – Psychology into two different Departments: Psychology – Social Work and Pedagogy. The new department was composed of 12 lecturers, 6 of them

with psychological background, 4 social workers, and 2 sociologists. Three members of academic staff had the associated professor title and all the others had completed the second cycle of study.

An important stage for the qualification of staff began from the year 2010 when the members of Psychology – Social Work Department started their doctoral studies in the University of Tirana and other Albanian and European universities.

The Department of Psychology – Social Work, nowadays, is composed of a staff of 11 internal members qualified in the field of social work, psychology, and sociology. Regarding their specialization, 4 members held a PhD in Social Work, 1 is Associated Professor and 4 others held a PhD in Psychology, and 1 held a PhD in Sociology. Also, the Department engages each academic year about 10 external professionals and practitioners of social work and psychology, lecturers, or assistant lecturers of the various disciplines of the bachelor and master programs.

In accordance with the Law 80/2015 “On Higher Education and Scientific Research in the Institutions of Higher Education in Republic of Albania” the program of study in Social Work is a university first cycle of three years study. Each year of study has 60 credits for a total of 180 credits of European Credit Transfer System)

From its beginnings to nowadays, in the program of study in Social Work at the University of Shkoder are registered each academic year about 60 students coming from the Municipality of Shkoder and other municipalities of North Albania.

Each year about 40 students complete successfully the program and are awarded with the diploma of first degree “Bachelor in Social Work”.

### **Methodology**

The methodological approach followed in this study is a curriculum content review, to identify if the mentioned theoretical knowledge focused on social services (system and organization of social services in Albania; roles and responsibilities about planning, developing, budgeting, monitoring and evaluating of social services nationally and locally; challenges and projections for the future of social services in a world that is changing) is included in the study program Bachelor in Social Work at USH and in the different syllabi.

Therefore, the focus of the analyses is to identify the scale that theoretical knowledge regarding such aspects of social services, as their system and organization, roles and responsibilities about planning, developing,

budgeting, monitoring, and evaluating social services, as well as related challenges, are part of the current curricula. Also, the analysis has taken into consideration the in – depth knowledge and practical skills that students obtain throughout their studies in relation to these issues.

The curriculum of study taken into review is that of Bachelor in Social Work 2019 – 2022. In accordance with the Council of Minister’s Decree “On the elements of study programs offered by the institutions of higher education” (VKM Nr. 41, 2018), the program is composed by 26 courses, grouped as following second the Type of Formative Activities:

*i) Base subjects – methodology and general formation (symbol A):* Introduction in Philosophy and Sociology; Introduction in Social Work; Introduction in Psychology; Communication Skills and Techniques; Scientific research methods.

*ii) Characterized formation subjects – formation in the scientific discipline (symbol B):* Developmental Psychology; Social Problems; Social Psychology; Social Work with children; Administration in social work; Social work practice in Mental health; Social work with family; Social policy; Social work with individuals; Right of the family; Juridical formation; Methods and skills in social work practice; Social work with groups and communities.

*iii) Interdisciplinary / Integrative subjects – sub disciplines, profiles and subjects chosen by the student (symbol C):* Statistics for the social sciences; Elective subject 1 (Psychological assessment / Ecology / Social Work in schools / European Integration); Elective subject 3 (Anthropology / Linguistic culture / Social work in juridical system); Elective subject 4 (Special education / Gender studies / Inclusive Education).

*iv) Complementary subjects – foreign languages, informatics, professional practice (Symbol D):*

Informatics; 1<sup>st</sup> foreign language; Elective 2<sup>nd</sup> foreign language; Practicum. In the first phase of the study, a general review of all course syllabi was done, in order to identify the subjects where aspects of social services were included. After 10 subjects were identified that included different aspects of social services, it was moved to the second phase, that of the in-depth examination of the content of the syllabuses, the activities, and the number of teaching hours dedicated to the above-mentioned aspects.

<i>Study programs</i>	<b>Total number of courses</b>	<b>Number of courses excluded</b>	<b>Number of courses included in the analysis</b>
Bachelor in “Social Work”	26	16	10

*Table 1. Data on the number of courses reviewed for the study program, Department of Psychology and Social Work, USH. Results and discussion*

The curriculum of study Bachelor in “Social Work” of academic year 2019 – 2022 is composed of 26 courses. The 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> years of study have 9 courses each and the 3<sup>rd</sup> year has 8 courses.

The academic year is composed of two semesters, each semester composed of 15 weeks (except the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of study has 14 weeks). The courses examined belong mainly to the type *characterized formation subjects – formation in the scientific discipline (symbol B)* and are presented according to the academic years they are lectured on. In total are reviewed 10 syllabi that contain topics related to social services, or 38% of the total courses.

The courses lectured in the first year of study, whose syllabi were analyzed are only two: Introduction in Social Work, Social problems.

*Introduction in Social Work (6 ETCS)* is a subject taught during the first semester (15 weeks: 3 hours lesson and 1 hour seminar per week). The course program aims to introduce the student with the basic concepts and the main theories of social work and to presents the different areas of social work intervention. During the presentation of the different areas of intervention, in 7 hours lessons are introduced general lines on the social services, including social services for children, persons with mental and other health problems, delinquency, drogue addicted, and elderly.

*Social problems (8 ETCS)* takes place in the first semester (15 weeks: 4 hours lesson and 2 seminars per week). The course is focused on the general understanding of the social problem as well the analysis of phenomena that stimulate the emergence of social problems.

In the first part of the course are analised the different sociological theoretical perspectives on social problems and in the second part are analised the different social problems that afflict the modern societies.

During the seminars of the second part of the course, the students are encouraged to analyze different phenomena that are defined in today's Albanian reality as social problems, and taught in 8 lessons, such as unemployment, violence against women, drugs abuse, human trafficking, child abuse, HIV / AIDS, problems of elderly people, discrimination of roma and egyptians, throuthrow individual and group work. In this work they have also to individualize the social institutions that take in charge these social problems in the central and local level.

*Administration in Social Work (8 ETCS)* is a subject taught on the first semester of the second year of the Bachelor program in Social Work (15

weeks: 4 hours lesson and 2 hours seminar per week). The course program is a presentation of the different aspects of administration in social work, such as the programming, managing and organization of social interventions. The course "Administration of Social Work" provides conceptual, theoretical and methodological basis in the organization and administration of social organizations and services.

There are at least 24 hours of lessons on topics related directly to the organization and administration of the social services: planning types in social services; types of budgets and financial management, process of organization and its principles, supervision principles; managing conflict in social organizations; and designing effective social programs.

Also during the seminars, students discuss the above issues and at the end of the course present their group work related to wright, and manage a mini project.

*Social policies (8 ETCS)* is a subject of disciplines characterizing the study program in "Social Work". The course is taught in the second semester (15 weeks: 4 hours lesson and 2 hours seminar per week). The primary objective of the course is to provide students with the key knowledge on Social Welfare State's policies. The course also aims to familiarize students with social policy models throughout their evolution, policy actors, and social services. At the end of the course, students should know how social policies are implemented in different areas and be mindful of the reform process and their ongoing modernization.

Integrated part of this course is the development of the Albanian Social System – from the beginnings of the post-comunist time to nowadays – and its composition on different Institutions (social insurance, health care insurance, social assistance) and social protection programs for different categories in need. During the second half of the course are treated, in about 20 hours of lessons, issues such as: the Albanian Social System in the beginning of the transition; the inherited Social Security Institution; reforming the Social Insurance Institution; Institution of Health Care Insurance; Social Assistance Institution; evaluation of social protection programs from the perspective of the beneficiary; evaluation of the social protection system in Albania; social programs for the persons with disabilities, children, and elderly people.

*Social work practice in mental health (8 ETCS)* is a new course of the Bachelor program in Social Work at USH, introduced for the first time in the academic year 2019 – 2020. "Social work practice in mental health" is taught during the entire second year of study (30 weeks: 2 lessons and 1

seminar per week).

Through this course students receive deep knowledge and concepts about the subject's subject matter, about mental health and about the role of social worker. During the first semester, student receive knowledge about the mental health problems (mainly as defined and classified in DMS-5). In the second semester, students acquire knowledge not only in the social work with persons with mental disorders but also of the social work and health care in a broader sense. There are discussed themes about the types of health care systems; the organization of the Albanian health care system; social work in acute care, ambulatory centres, longer term care, and paliative care. *Social work with children (6 ETCS)* is a discipline that focuses on the child and his physical, psychological, emotional well-being. Social work with children is taught in the first semester (15 week: 3 lessons and 2 seminar). The objectives are to provide students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills about the models and practices of the social work with children; to take knowledge on children 's protection system in Albania and the institutions responsible for guaranteeing child protection; to recognize children's rights in Albania.

There are about 12 hours of lessons that provide students with knowledge about the rights and the social services for children. In this course students build practical skills and learn techniques about the social work with children in about 15 hours of lessons and 10 hours of seminars. They develop the skills to work with different target groups of children. The course also aims students to appropriate specific techniques of interaction with children such as gaming tecniques, advocacy and lobbying, case management and work in multidisiplinary team.

*Social work with families (6 ETCS)* is a course taught in the second semester of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year (15 week: 3 lessons and 2 seminar).

The knowlegde gained throug the course enabe the student to assess the family and determine the ways of interfering with the family. Social work with the family also provides an integrative model for working with families according to the needs of the family.

The couse is almost entirely on providing students with practical skills in social work with families, including the following: assessment and intervention phases of the aid process according to a systemic approach; using the positive feedback; modification of disfunctional interactions; recognition of the family system according to the assessment dimensions and student training in defining family problems according to the need's level.

The syllabi included in the analysis that pertain to courses taught in the third year of study are Practicum, Methods and skills in social work practice, and Social work with groups and communities.

*Practicum (11 ETCS)* in Social Work is held during the entire 3<sup>rd</sup> year of study conceived as a combination of field practice in the institutions offering social services and discussions in classroom related to field practice issues (29 weeks; 4 hours per week). A series of practical classes are intertwined with theoretical hours, during which the student not only is acquainted with the institutions, their modes of functioning and organization, but also actively involved in some of the activities of these institutions, the nature and selection of which goes in line with the objectives of the subject.

Through the practice in institutions it is intended that the students understand how social services are organized in the Northern part of the Country; know the nature of public social services provided and the role of non-profit organizations; reflect on the organization of work.

*Methods and skills in social work practice (8 ETCS)* is a presentation of the different methods of social intervention and of the skills that a social worker uses in the field.

"Methods and skills in social work practice" is an important yearly course, taking place during the first and the second semester of the third year of study (29 weeks, weekly academic workload: 2 lessons and 1 seminar).

This subject treats theoretical and also practical knowledge, presenting to the students relevant professional techniques, methods and skills of social works which help the supportive process (about 30 hours of lesson), including between other evaluation and supervision in social work (4 lessons).

*Social work with groups and communities (8 ETCS)* takes place in the second semester (15 weeks, weekly academic workload: 4 lessons and 2 seminars).

The purpose of this course is to present to the students adequate models on treating and resolving group or community problems. The course also aims to present standards and skills related to the mezzo and macro practice.

In the second half of the course, the students face, between others, the themes of community perspectives and social worker role and the assessment of community needs' and the social services required (about 8 hours of lessons and 4 hours of seminars).

#### *Conclusions and recommendations*

The curriculum of study Bachelor in "Social Work" at the University of



Shkoder “Luigj Gurakuqi” includes different aspects on organization, planning, budgeting, monitoring, and evaluating of social services at national and local level.

The inclusion of such aspects is seen especially in characterized formation subjects – formation in the scientific discipline of Social Work (symbol B). Subjects of the first year of study as “Introduction in social work” and “Social problems” introduce students with the basic concepts of social work intervention and social services provision.

During the second and the third years of study the students take deeper knowledge about the organization and the functioning of social services at national and local level. Courses as "Administration of Social Work" and “Social policies” provide presentations of the different aspects of administration in social work, such as the programming, managing and organization of social interventions, as well as about the Albanian Social System’s composition on different Institutions and social protection programs. “Social work with children”, “Social work with families”, “Social Work practice in Mental Health” include informations about the Albanian protection system for children, families, and persons with health problems.

An important course of Bachelor program in Social Work is "Practicum". Through the practice in institutions the students see how social services are organized in the local level, Municipality of Shkoder and other municipalities in north Albania.

In conclusion, the curriculum of study Bachelor in “Social Work” at USH includes general aspects on organization of social services at national level. Only in the third year of study, through the “Practicum” subject (Internship in the institutions) the students are faced with the concrete organization of the services at local level.

For a better inclusion and an improvement of the level of knowledge and practical skills on social services, based on the finding of these analyses, we recommend changes in the curriculum of study and the syllabi of the Bachelor degree in “Social Work” in two main directions:

First, it is good to include, in courses of second and third years of study, especially in characterized formation more information about the organization of social services at national level, particularly aspects of planning, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation of services.

Second, in courses that deals with social work in different areas and target groups, it is important to include aspects of social services at the local level,

bringing examples from specific institutions that work in Municipality of Shkoder and in North Albania more in general.

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## **SESSION III**

# **MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING**



## **Management of the Post-Covid Situation Under the Influence of Anxiety and Locus of Control in Students of the Psychology and Social Work Branches**

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### **Abstract**

During 2021 and the first half of 2022, we have been in the post-covid situation, which we have tried to overcome by respecting the conditions and measures in our way. A way that has shown various influences like our level of anxiety and locus of control. In a sample in the form of a census of about 200 students, the follow-up and compliance measures under the influence of anxiety and locus of control variables are presented in this article without forgetting the influence they can have on each other. All this is under a study carried out last year, the results of a part of which are presented in this conference article, being included in the group of numerous studies that have been carried out around the world. The article in question tries to reveal the psychosocial influence in overcoming the post-covid situation, the manifestations of anxiety levels and locus of control, as well as the relationship between them in the selected sample.

*Key words: COVID-19, Students, Vaccination, Anxiety, Locus of control.*

### **Introduction**

This article presents a part taken from the study done at the University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi" in the faculties of Education Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Economics, with Bachelor level students. We emphasize that the research paper has included only students of the Psychology and Social Work branches. The impact of the covid-19 period on human society, including the Albanian one, has shown multifaceted and psychological impacts. The role of psychological aspects in coping with the covid-19 situation and its management in their effect on university student youth constitutes another major reason to present this research contribution.

The paper's main purpose is to analyze the post-covid management of Psychology and Social Work students under the influence of anxiety and locus of control. Another goal of the paper is to obtain empirical data on the impact of covid-19, the way of its treatment, and the times of vaccination of the students included in our sample. A third aim of the paper is to verify the relationship between the level of anxiety with the times of vaccination and the way of treatment of covid-19 with the tendency/trend of the individual's locus of control.

The work refers to the realization of goals by defining clear objectives, some of which are:

- the necessary clarifications of the literature on covid-19, anxiety, locus of control, etc.;
- determining the correct methodology for what the work aims at (selection of the sample, determination of the evaluation instrument, etc., methodological techniques);
- administration and processing of empirical data;
- extracting the results;
- interpretation and analysis of results;
- publication of research data;

Adapted to its goals and objectives, we raised 6 research questions which are:

1. How is the impact of covid-19 on the students of our sample?
2. What is the way of treatment made by touching covid-19?
3. What is the vaccination situation among the students of our sample?
4. How do anxiety and locus of control variables appear?
5. Do anxiety levels affect vaccination times?

At the end of the introduction, we emphasize that the paper refers to a clear structure and that all the work was done following correctly all the necessary ethical points.

### **Literature review**

Anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes such as increased blood pressure (APA, pg 66).

People with anxiety disorders usually have recurrent intrusive thoughts or worries. They may avoid certain situations out of worry. They may also have physical symptoms such as sweating, shaking, dizziness, or a fast heart rate. Anxiety is not the same as fear, but they are often used

interchangeably. Anxiety is considered a future-oriented, long-acting response broadly focused on a diffuse threat, whereas fear is an appropriate, present-oriented, and short-lived response to a clearly identifiable and specific threat (Hoti V, & Hoti. A, 2022).

The locus of control shows the place from which people start to evaluate the developments of occurrences and events in their lives, themselves, or external influences. (APA Dictionary, pg, 608). Individuals with a strong internal locus of control believe that every action has consequences and that the results of their actions reflect their abilities and how they operate in the world. They believe that the events that happen to them are the result of their choices and actions, whether or not they choose to have control over them. Individuals with a high external locus of control interpret events in their lives as being influenced not by their own actions or abilities, but by circumstances beyond their control. Individuals with a strong external locus of control rely on concepts such as "fate" and chance to frame their experiences. In the same way, while some circumstances are perhaps beyond most people's ability to know or control, other circumstances are within our power to influence. In reality, for most people, a mix of internal and external factors influence beliefs about life course events, depending on their health and mental health problems and their socio-economic circumstances. Locus of control over health care concerns how individuals think about and react to their health and health care decisions. Findings from many studies support that an internal locus of control is positively related to improved physical and mental health and quality of life (Maltby, Day, and Macaskill 2017).

During covid-19 there were effects on people's anxiety, reflected in many studies. A qualitative systematic review was conducted to investigate the prevalence and correlates of anxiety in different sample populations concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this systematic review show that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected the mental health of many populations in society. Anxiety is prevalent within the general population, health care workers, university students, and other vulnerable groups.

Halperin and colleagues (2021) reported that the prevalence of anxiety among university students was 30.6%. [54].

There is an extensive literature base that has shown that those suffering from pandemic-related psychological distress tend to exhibit elevated levels of post-traumatic stress, general stress, anxiety, health anxiety, and suicidality (Chong et al., 2004). ; Wheaton et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2009; Yip

et al., 2010) which may extend beyond the course of the pandemic.

Islaml and colleagues (2020) reported that anxiety among university students had worsened compared to pre-pandemic rates and the duration of the lockdowns. Conversely, Kim et al., (2021) did not report significant changes in anxiety during lockdowns.

## **Methodology**

### *Research design*

The work is empirical, analytical-descriptive, exploratory, and correlative in nature. It aims to interpret the data obtained empirically by describing and analyzing them in light of the presented research questions. The work aims to verify through exploration of the condition of students affected by Covid-19, the way to treat it, and the vaccination procedure of our sample. Also, the interpretations refer to the variables anxiety and locus of control as selected elements to analyze the management of the post-covid situation.

To best realize the research objectives, the paper is based on a diverse methodology that includes frequencies, percentages, cross-tabulations, correlations, etc.

### *Sample*

Part of the sample of this paper are students of the Psychology and Social Work departments of the Faculty of Education Sciences at the University of Shkodra. Their selection was made in the form of a census. Based on the data available to the institution, more than 70% of the registered students are included. There is also a small number of students who were not counted because other questionnaires did not prove valid. Bearing in mind that active and regular attending students are included here, then the percentage is even higher.

Students have been invited to participate in the sample through their desire and volunteering, 178 students have been included who have met the criteria: they are Bachelor level students and they are students of the Psychology and Social Work branches of the Faculty of Education Sciences. Only a very small number of students refused to be involved.

### *Instrument tools*

To obtain empirical data, the instrument was designed, which is divided into three parts. The first part includes 4 questions with alternatives that



require information on exposure to covid-19, the degree of exposure, how to treat it, and times of vaccination against covid-19.

The second part includes Beck's anxiety inventory, while the third part of the instrument presents Rotter's locus of control scale. The instrument has been adapted to the Albanian language and has passed its piloting phase.

#### *Administration and data collection*

The questionnaires were administered to me in collaboration with some students of the Psychology branch at the University of Shkodra. They were completed during the seminar hours when student participation is greater. Before completing it, the students were informed about the reasons and method of completing it and they were guaranteed the anonymity of answering.

They are given 15-20 minutes to complete it individually. Under our supervision, its completion was followed and further clarifications were given in case of need, even though the latter were isolated.

After completing the instrument, it was submitted and this was done for the submission of 178 instruments. After the collection, their answers were coded and the work began to put the data into the Excel program that will enable the creation of the database. After creating the database, the work focused on their processing according to the SPSS 26 program.

#### **Results and discussions**

There were 178 students with valid answers belonging to 2 branches. The distribution of the sample according to the branches of the study is presented in the following table.

Table 1. Distribution of the sample according to study branches

<b>Branches</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Psychology	67	37.4%
Social Work	111	62.6%
<b>Total</b>	178	100%

Based on Table 1, it results that the frequency and percentage distribution of our sample is as follows: 67 students (37.4%) in the Psychology branch, and 111 students (62.6%) in the Social Work branch.

Affected by Covid-19

The following table presents data on the subject's experience of personal

vulnerability to Covid-19.

Table 2. The personal impact of Covid-19

		Study Branch		Total
		Psychology	Social Work	
What is your personal experience with Covid?	I have not had covid	21	53	74
	It affected me 1 time	34	43	77
	It has affected me more than 1 time	12	15	27
Total		67	111	178

We see that we have 74 students who have not been affected by Covid-19, 77 students who have been affected 1 time, and 27 students who have been affected more than once. According to the branches of study, we have such a distribution: in the Psychology branch, 21 unaffected students, 34 affected students once, and 12 students were affected more than once. In the Social Work branch, 53 students were unaffected by Covid-19, 43 students were affected once and 15 students were affected more than once by Covid-19. Slightly more than 20% of Psychology students were affected more than 1 time against less than 15% of Social Work students. Nearly half of Social Work students have not been affected by Covid-19 compared to almost 30% of Psychology students.

It turns out that 42% of the students are not affected, and the rest of the affected are found to be affected only once. Only 15% of those affected were affected more than once.

Table 3. Vaccination against Covid-19

		Study Branch		Total
		Psychology	Social Work	
In protection against covid, how many times have you been vaccinated?	Unvaccinated	23	41	64
	Vaccinated 1 time	10	9	19
	Vaccinated 2 time	33	60	93
	Vaccinated 3 time	1	1	2
Total		67	111	178

Table 3 shows that: 64 students are unvaccinated, 19 students have been

vaccinated 1 time, 93 students have been vaccinated 2 times and only 2 students have been vaccinated 3 times. According to the branches of the study, it turns out that: in the Psychology branch, we have 23 unvaccinated students, 10 students vaccinated once, 33 students vaccinated 2 times, and 1 student vaccinated 3 times. In the social work branch, we have 41 unvaccinated students, 9 students vaccinated 1 time, 60 students vaccinated 2 times, and 1 student who was vaccinated 3 times. The highest frequencies are found in 2 times vaccination. This applies both to the entire sample and to each branch. Out of 178 students, 36% of them (N=64) were not vaccinated and 52% of them (N=93) were vaccinated 2 times. The rest, in a very large percentage, have been vaccinated once.

Even according to the branches of study, the data are almost the same with a small difference in values between them. It is important that in coping with the post-covid-19 situation, almost 2/3 of the students have followed the vaccination procedure.

Tabela 4. The way of treatment

	Study Branch		Total
	Psychology	Social Work	
If you have been affected, On foot, without being you have been treated for isolated and in the covid? "popular" way.	13	12	25
Isolated at home with a light cure according to some instructions from those who knew such treatment.	18	28	46
Isolated at home with a typical cure according to the doctor's recommendation.	17	20	37
Total	48	60	108

Table no. 4 shows us how the students have handled the impact of covid-19. It turns out that 42% of them (N=46) went through it according to the instructions of someone who knew about their treatment, just over 30% of them had followed the treatment course according to the doctor's recommendation and the rest (23%) had used the "popular" way of

treatment.

Results on anxiety level.

Table 5. Anxiety levels Crosstabulation

		Study Branch		Total
		Psychology	Social Work	
Anxiety levels	No anxiety	23	49	72
	His anxiety subsides	26	35	61
	High Anxiety	18	27	45
Total		67	111	178

Table no. 5 shows that the distribution of the sample in anxiety levels is as follows: 72 students are at the non-anxiety level, 61 students at the low anxiety level, and 45 students at the high anxiety level. It is seen that 25% experience high anxiety and the rest either do not have anxiety or their anxiety is found at non-worrying and problematic levels, we can say that it is in a normal manifestation that brings concern or worry to cope with the post-covid situation. The percentage with high anxiety is met by both branches. The Psychology branch with a little more than 25% and the Social Work branch with less than 25%. So even in both schools, relatively ¼ of the students, their representatives, show anxiety at a non-problematic level.

Table 6. Type of locus \* Branch of Study Crosstabulation

		Study Branch		Total
		Psychology	Social Work	
Locus Type	LKB	28	33	61
	LKJ	39	78	117
Total		67	111	178

From table no. 6 we note that the students of our sample have distributions in both types of locus of control. There are 117 students with an external locus of control (LOC) and 61 students with an internal locus of control (LKB). The highest frequency with LKJ also appears in both branches but with differences in distribution. In the Psychology branch, we have almost 60% with LKB and a little over 40% with LKJ, while in the Social Work branch, we have almost 30% students with LKB and over 70% with LKJ.

Table 7. Correlation anxiety level with vaccination time

		Anxiety levels	In protection against covid, how many times have you been vaccinated:
Anxiety levels	Pearson Correlation	1	-.015
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.844
	N	178	178
In protection against covid, how many times have you been vaccinated?	Pearson Correlation	-.015	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.844	
	N	178	178

Table no. 7 of the correlation between anxiety and vaccination times shows that the Pearson correlation coefficient is -0.15.

### Conclusions

The students in our sample have had different experiences of being touched with covid-19, from not being touched to being touched more than once. More than 60% of them have been affected by Covid-19. They have reacted to it, not in a single form; however, it is worth noting that over 75% of them have followed the treatment to it according to the rules, cures, and medical procedures.

The students of our sample belonging to the Psychology and Social Work branches show a post-covid confrontation relatively kept under control by following and respecting all post-covid requirements and procedures as they should. This is shown not only by the greater frequency of vaccination (2 times) but also by the occurrences at normal levels of anxiety without being influenced by the fact that their locus tendency is LKB or LKJ. The weak influence of anxiety indicates that the situation of their psychological functioning is returning to its normality.

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## **Factors Influencing Parents' Anxiety in Hospitalization of their Children**

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### **Abstract**

Illness and hospitalization are often critical events that a child faces, as well as his parents, especially mothers, who are in more frequent contact with the child. Parental stress and anxiety can affect the child in two ways, by transferring the stress to the child, as well as by interfering with the mother's ability to care for the child. This study aims to analyze the relationship between anxiety levels and hospitalization in parents who have hospitalized children. The sample for the study was selected conveniently. 61 (N=61) people participated in the study. The Deborah Beidel Anxiety Disorder Assessment (ADA) Questionnaire was used to measure anxiety levels that was completed by parents who had hospitalized children. The questionnaire is self-reported. For the realization of the topic, a review of previous and contemporary literature was made and this topic is an attempt to bring a panorama of how the hospitalization of the child is related, with the reporting of the anxiety levels that parents experience when they have children hospitalized, including variables that are directly related to hospitalization, such as the specific diagnosis or not, the number of previous hospitalizations of the child or not, the time spent in the child's hospitalization, as well as other variables that are indirectly related, such as education level, status socio-economic, age, etc. The IBM statistical program, SPSS Statistics 20, was used for data analysis. From the statistical analysis, it can be seen that the most frequent symptoms were related to: constant feeling of fear, inner feeling of nervousness and insecurity, feeling of tension, crying immediately/too often, loss of appetite, headache, difficulty fall asleep It was seen that there was a high statistical significance between the time of the child's hospitalization, the number of the child's hospitalizations, the child's diagnosis and the self-reported levels of anxiety

by the parents, where for all three of these ( $p < 0.05$ ). Other variables taken in the study showed relationships of all types, including: strong negative relationship between level of education and self-reported level of anxiety by parents ( $r = -0.71$ ), moderate negative relationship between socioeconomic status with self-reported levels of anxiety ( $r = -0.69$ ). The study data would constitute an innovation in the field of psychology study and to further understand and intervene in the reduction of anxiety symptoms in parents of hospitalized children.

*Key words: Anxiety, Hospitalization, Influencing factors, Diagnosis.*

## **Introduction**

Anxiety can be defined as a tense emotional state, characterized by a variety of symptoms including difficulty breathing, chest discomfort, rapid heartbeat, tremors, sweating, etc. Under normal circumstances, the human nervous system is built in such a way as to prepare and mobilize the individual to "fight" or "flee" from a threat or from a situation that is perceived as threatening (Foa et al., 1995). While anxiety is a universal human experience and is undoubtedly a common human emotion, its evocation does not necessarily imply the presence of a clinically significant disorder (Adolphs et al., 1995). The National Institute of Mental Health Epidemiological Catchment Area Survey found that anxiety disorders are the most common mental health problems covering about 8.3% of the population (Wray, et al, 2014).

Anxiety and its experience is related to many predisposing factors such as family and genetic factors, as studies by Finn & Crabbe, (2013) and Smoller and colleagues (2020) show; temperament and personality as factors studied for their impact on anxiety according to Vasey & Dadds, (2010) or even Spielberg, 2012; psychological trauma can be influencing factors in the outbreak of anxiety according to the studies of JoAnne and colleagues (2000). Also, the lack of coping mechanisms can be aligned in the factors that affect the initiation and maintenance of anxiety (Meichenbaum, 2005) as well as irrational thoughts, dysfunctional beliefs and difficulties in the perception and processing of information would also affect the problems of experiencing anxiety (Pigott et al., 2003).

Many studies have found through research that anxiety can be perceived or initiated as a result of physical illnesses, for example the development of anxiety after the onset of a physical problem is not an unusual reaction



during the individual's attempt to adapt to the illness. Physical problems can cause symptoms such as fatigue or symptoms of depression, overlapping these with symptoms of anxiety and symptoms of physical illness overwhelm the individual's life and make it more difficult to adapt or improve from the illness (Greer et al., 2018).

Also, according to the study of Odetola and colleagues (2015) it was found that the amount of impact of a current illness in adults and adolescents with anxiety suggests that considering the role of other disorders in strengthening the risk for the initial development and persistence over time of the disorders of anxiety can be fruitful. The difficulty in determining the time of onset of particular disorders, especially from retrospective data, reduces the ability to determine temporal relationships between disorders (Odetola et al., 2015). Even Murray and Lopez had also reached this conclusion according to their study (Murray & Lopez, 2010).

Events or other life stressors that can precipitate anxiety can be serious events such as the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, the illness of a close person, these events therefore trigger anxiety reactions. If we return more specifically to the study, hospitalization of the child is a stressful event for parents. Previous studies have found increased stress in families with children affected by various types of pathologies, and have analyzed the objective variables associated with the disease that produce stress. However, most of these studies recruited caregivers of children with chronic or serious illnesses and focused on assessing objective environmental stressors. The aim of this study was to investigate the perception of acute stress in caregivers who cared for their children without serious physical injuries hospitalized for short periods. This study was conducted with a sample of caregivers of children hospitalized for minor acute illnesses. The research was conducted using two standardized tests, PSM (Psychological Stress Measure) and STAI (State Trait Anxiety Inventory), whose characteristics were reliability and validity. The data showed that caregivers of hospitalized children perceived high levels of stress and anxiety. The perception of stress was influenced by the degree of proximity to patients, length of hospitalization and especially participation in some of the activities offered to children, mainly school services (Bonichini et al., 2009).

The findings showed that hospitalization of children is a stressful event for caregivers, even if the hospitalization is for moderate and temporary pathologies. Perception of stress was influenced by length of hospitalization and degree of kinship. The findings even suggest that some

services provided to children may moderate the perception of stress and the impact of hospitalization. Caregivers whose children have used the school's services describe themselves as less nervous and with higher emotional control compared to other caregivers. Considering the importance of education in a child's life, the opportunity to continue school activities helped caregivers feel less pressured. In light of this finding, improving school activities in pediatric departments may represent a critical point to ensure a more pleasant hospital stay for children and their caregivers and thus improve family involvement in care management (Berenbaum et al., 1992).

Hospitalization, especially that of children in tertiary health institutions, such as hospitals, is associated with a number of mental health problems of the parents as well. Thus, a pilot study conducted in the USA to assess the anxiety and stress experienced and displayed by parents whose children were hospitalized for at least 3 days found that almost two-thirds of parents from the results showed very high levels of anxiety at the clinical level (Wray et al., 2017).

While in Sweden, in the study by Hallstrom and Elander (2016), parents' requests from the hospital institution were assessed while their children were hospitalized, with the aim of reducing their anxiety and assessing their coping skills for the situation they were in. They observed that parents wanted to feel more confident in the hospital about the conditions or type of illness of the child and that anxiety and stress symptoms increased while they were there (Hallström & Elander, 2014).

Parents have an important role in promoting the health of their children, being the main agents involved in the direct care of their children. Parents' psychosocial functioning is important for children's physical and mental health outcomes, and their attitudes during the child's illness, especially during hospitalization, can profoundly influence the child's adherence to care and the impact of the illness (Lee et al. al., 2012).

Some studies have found increased stress in the families of children with various diseases such as asthma, diabetes, heart disease and other chronic pathologies, as well as not only in chronic diseases, but also in other acute diseases that require hospitalization. daily (Esmaeilzadeh, 2013). The evidence presented suggests that parental stress has important implications for children's health and behavioral outcomes. Parental stress is influenced by particular conditions, such as family structure characteristics. For example, adoptive mothers perceive higher levels of stress during their child's hospitalization compared to biological mothers whose children were

hospitalized (Selye, 1976). Other research has led to the identification of several psychosocial mediators that have been found to be important determinants of the stress response during child hospitalization. Intensive psychosocial intervention in chronic inpatients and outpatients has been found to have a positive impact on child and family functioning, thereby reducing stress levels (Commodari, 2010).

So we see that many aspects of parents' lives change during a hospital stay, including their physiological needs and social and economic issues, which can cause stress and worry for parents. Feelings of stress and anxiety are often associated with a lack of information about diseases and medical procedures. Pain is caused by imposed treatments, ignorance of hospital rules and regulations, unfriendly staff and fear of asking questions (Uguz et al., 2004). Based on previous studies, the factors that cause stress in mothers of hospitalized children are: environmental factors, management factors for the current situation, socioeconomic factors, factors related to the child's circumstances, thus leading to the fact that a higher level high family stress can reduce the mother's ability to cope with problems (Shirley et al., 1998; Tehrani et al., 2012).

Other studies by authors such as Teichman and colleagues (2019) and Callery (2000) claimed in their studies that hospitalized children were affected by the anxiety of their mothers and fathers while they were hospitalized for reasons of their chronic diseases (Teichman et al., 2019; Kagan, 2000).

Often the attention is focused on the child patient and this is more than normal, but in most cases it is forgotten to take care of the needs of the parents who take care of their hospitalized children (Mikkelsen & Frederiksen, 2011).

Many other studies have highlighted some psychological effects on parents of parents hospitalized with chronic diseases. Below we present some of these studies and conclusions:

- 52% of relatives reported at least mild to moderate depression (Pejovic-Milovancevic et al., 2003);
- 48% reported mild to moderate anxiety (Lee et al., 2012);
- 50% had experienced an increase in the level of stress (Philichi, 1999);
- 33% had high depression scores (Youngblut & Shiao, 2005)
- 25% had high depression scores (JoAnne et al., 2000).

Problems with stress and emotionality are easily recognizable in parents who have their children hospitalized. The period immediately after the diagnosis is a time of intense parental anxiety, which can affect the failure

to understand information, or the emergence of acute feelings of personal responsibility for the disease, fear of separation, hostility towards the medical staff and disruption of normal individual functioning (Khajen et al., 2015). Also, other studies found that parents who refuse to accept the diagnosis sometimes display open and strong hostility toward medical personnel (Youngblut & Lauzon, 1995; Wallinga, 2007).

Finally, it is important to consider that all family members can be affected by the hospitalization of a child in a family. Siblings may also experience a variety of problems, including emotional distress, school problems, and aggression (Lam et al., 2006). On the other hand, financial problems may occur due to health care expenses or the loss of a job by one or more family members, but even the quality of the relationship in the family may worsen or improve in these situations (Hallstrom et al., 2002; Vguz, 2004).

So, from the numerous studies and literature, many factors are observed, which influence the birth, development and maintenance of a fragile mental health of parents while their child is hospitalized for various reasons. Considering the quality of the parents' mental health would directly affect the health progress of the hospitalized child.

## Methods

**Research desing:** The purpose of this paper is to measure the level of anxiety displayed by parents who have hospitalized children, also analyzing the factors that correlate with the appearance of anxiety symptoms in these parents.

The objectives of the study are: Examining and measuring the levels of anxiety displayed by parents who have hospitalized children; Examining the relationship between definite/indeterminate diagnosis and anxiety levels displayed by parents who have hospitalized children; Examining the relationship between the time a child is hospitalized and self-reported levels of anxiety; Reviewing the number of child hospitalizations and self-reported levels of anxiety; Analyzing the relationship between the age of the parents and the level of anxiety displayed during the period of hospitalization of the child as well as examining the relationship between the first hospitalization or not of the child and the levels of anxiety displayed by the parents.

As well the hypotheses of the study are:

1. There is a statistically significant relationship between the number of child hospitalizations and the occurrence of anxiety levels in parents.

2. There is a statistically significant relationship between the time in hospitalization and the manifestation of anxiety levels in parents
3. There is a positive correlation between the young age of the parent and the occurrence of anxiety levels.
4. There is a statistically significant association between diagnosis (specified/unspecified) and the occurrence of anxiety levels in parents of hospitalized children.

**Participants:** A convenient sample was chosen for the study, since the questionnaires were completed by individuals who had the desire to participate in the study, explaining the purpose of the study and the procedure for completing the questionnaire. This study is a correlational study.

61 participants, 7 fathers and 54 mothers, took part in the study. The parents of the children included in the study were the parents of the child who was hospitalized at the age of 0-2 years.

**Instruments:** The instrument used in this study is the Anxiety Disorder Assessment, by author Deborah Beidel (2011). The questionnaire has a total of 28 statements that aim to measure the level of anxiety of parents who have hospitalized children. The questionnaire is self-administered and categorizes the measurement of anxiety into three levels: low anxiety level, moderate anxiety level and high anxiety level. The questionnaire takes between 5 and 10 minutes on average. Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire in this study came out with a high reliability value of 0.919, The IBM SPSS Statistics 20 program was used to analyze the data of this study.

**Ethical issues:** Ethical issues have been maximally respected in this study. The best and most efficient way to carry out the study was precisely to ensure the preservation of the anonymity of the subjects who submitted to filling out the questionnaires so that the subjects included in the study had a higher freedom in filling out the questionnaires without being influenced by any factors other external.

**Limitations of the study:** One of the limitations of this study is that the sample taken in the study was relatively small, as a result of the lack of access and the time limitation to include a wider range of participants in the study. This may reduce the possibility of a large representativeness of the studied issue. Another limitation is related to the fact that other variables can also affect the studied issue, so they also need to be measured.

## Results and discussions

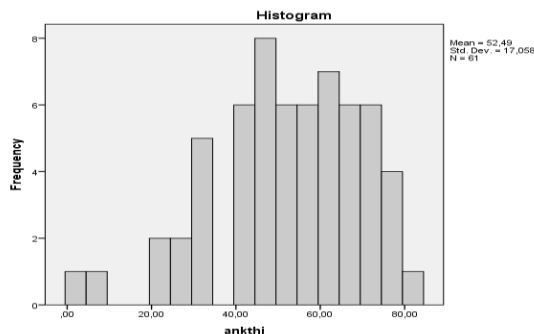
The theme of this paper focused on the study of the relationship between hospitalization and self-reported levels of anxiety from parents who had hospitalized children. Among the variables of the study that aimed to measure the relationship between the self-reported level of anxiety had to do with the age of the participants, where the participants started from the age of 17-18 to the age of 44 which was the maximum, the other variable was whether the child's diagnosis was determined or not, whether the child had been hospitalized before or not, the parent's education level, socioeconomic status, as well as the time the child spent in the hospital, i.e. 1 day or more than one day hospitalized, the number of hospitalizations of the child.

Regarding the data, it can be said that the average level of anxiety experienced would be  $M=52.49$  ( $DS=17.05$ ), which means that most of the participants report a moderate level of anxiety. The lowest reported value is 2.00 and the highest reported value is 81.00. However, from the collected data, the value variance ( $s= 290.98$ ) shows that there is a large distance between the level of anxiety reported, which is affected by the presence of extreme values.

The data showed that the level of anxiety varied between the values of 40 and 60. The highest value was the level of anxiety with a score of 52.49. Most participants reported more than average anxiety.

While the minimum value of the anxiety level reported was approximately 20, while the maximum value of the anxiety level is approximately 80. The greatest concentration of values was presented between 40 and 60.

Graph 1. Frequency representation of self-reported anxiety level by parents



The graph above shows the frequencies for the level of anxiety reported. From the frequency table for the level of anxiety, it is observed that 8.1% of the participants ( $N =5$ ) reported a low level of anxiety (0-28); 52.1% of

participants (N=32) reported moderate level of anxiety (28-56); and 39.8% of participants (N=24) reported high level of anxiety (57-84).

Table 1. Summary of Parental anxiety symptoms

Parental Anxiety Symptoms	Mean	Mode	Medial	Standard Deviation	Variance	Range
1. Sudden fear and without any reason	1.62	3	2.00	1.227	1.505	3
<b>2. Constant feeling of fear</b>	<b>1.98</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2.00</b>	<b>1.088</b>	<b>1.183</b>	<b>3</b>
3. Fainting, dizziness or weakness	1.79	3	2.00	1.240	1.537	3
<b>4. Internal feeling of nervousness or uncertainty</b>	<b>2.02</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2.00</b>	<b>1.025</b>	<b>1.050</b>	<b>3</b>
5. Frequent heartbeats	1.75	3	2.00	1.090	1.189	3
6. Vibrations	1.66	3	2.00	1.138	1.296	3
<b>7. Feeling of tension or nervousness</b>	<b>2.03</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2.00</b>	<b>.930</b>	<b>.866</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>8. Headache</b>	<b>1.98</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2.00</b>	<b>1.103</b>	<b>1.216</b>	<b>3</b>
9. Expression of horror or fear	1.87	3	2.00	1.132	1.283	3
10. The feeling of being unable to stay in one place	1.85	3	2.00	1.108	1.228	3
11. Feeling of energy drop, awkwardness	1.74	3	2.00	1.109	1.230	3
12. Blames himself for things	1.84	3	2.00	1.052	1.106	3
<b>13. Crying immediately/very quickly</b>	<b>2.08</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2.00</b>	<b>.988</b>	<b>.977</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>14. Loss of appetite</b>	<b>2.02</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2.00</b>	<b>1.008</b>	<b>1.016</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>15. Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep</b>	<b>2.02</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2.00</b>	<b>1.103</b>	<b>1.216</b>	<b>3</b>
16. Feeling of losing hope for the future	1.75	3	2.00	1.120	1.255	3
17. 17. Feeling of despair	1.97	3	2.00	.983	.966	3
18. Feeling of loneliness	1.90	3	2.00	1.091	1.190	3
19. Feeling of falling/trapped	1.59	2	2.00	1.101	1.213	3
20. Excessive worry about things	1.89	2	2.00	.896	.803	3
21. Lack of interest in things	1.79	2	2.00	1.018	1.037	3
22. Feelings that everything is difficult	1.82	3	2.00	1.073	1.150	3
23. Feelings of worthlessness	1.85	2	2.00	1.046	1.095	3
24. I feel bored and desperate	1.97	3	2.00	.948	.899	3
25. I feel calm	1.38	1	1.00	.986	.972	3
26. I feel energetic, active and	1.34	1	1.00	.929	.863	3

powerful						
27. When I wake up I feel fresh and tired	1.36	2	1.00	.913	.834	3
28. My daily life is full of things that interest me	1.56	1	1.00	1.025	1.051	3

The most frequent reactions are those of a physiological, behavioral and emotional nature.

From the data collected from the ratio between hospitalization 1 time in a year and hospitalization more than once in a year of the child for chronic disease in relation to self-reported levels of anxiety by the child's parent it was observed that 33 parents (N=33), had their child hospitalized 1 time within this year and 28 parents (N=28) had their child hospitalized more than 1 time within the year. It is also noted that the average of participants who had hospitalized their child more than once during the year was M=2.50, SD=0.57, which is slightly higher than for parents who had hospitalized their child only once during of the year, where M=2.18, DS=0.63.

Also, it is noticeable that for both cases  $p < 0.05$ , giving us a high statistical significance between the number of hospitalizations within the year and the level of anxiety self-reported by the parents.

The data related to the percentages of anxiety levels based on the number of hospitalizations were as follows: 4 (N=4) participants who reported low levels of anxiety and their child was hospitalized 1 time during the year, translated in percentage we have 12.1%; 19 participants reported a moderate level of anxiety (N=19) and their child was hospitalized 1 time during the year, turned into a percentage we have 57.6%; and 10 (N=10) participants reported high levels of anxiety 30.3% in the case when their child was hospitalized 1 time during the year. While we are looking at cases of hospitalization more than once within this year, only 1 (N=1) participant reported a low level of anxiety, turning this into a percentage of 3.6%, 12 (N=12) participants reported a moderate level of anxiety, i.e. 42.9% and 15 (N=15) participants reported high levels of anxiety, i.e. 53.6%. It is noted that in cases where the child was hospitalized once during the year, the participants reported more moderate levels of anxiety, while in cases where the child was hospitalized more than once during the year, the participants reported more very high level of anxiety.



Table 2. Number of hospitalization in a year

<b>Hospitalization number</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>
1 time within the year	33	2.1818	.63514
More than 1 time within a year	28	2.5000	.57735

Table 3. Anxiety symptoms and duration of child hospitalization

<b>Hospitalization duration in days</b>	<b>Low anxiety level</b>	<b>Moderate anxiety level</b>	<b>High anxiety level</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>1 day</b>	<b>2.9%</b> <b>1</b>	<b>37.1%</b> <b>13</b>	<b>60.0%</b> <b>20</b>	<b>100%</b> <b>35</b>
<b>More than 1 day</b>	<b>15.4%</b> <b>4</b>	<b>69.2%</b> <b>18</b>	<b>15.4%</b> <b>4</b>	<b>100%</b> <b>26</b>

The interesting fact about these variables above was that they came out with a high statistical significance, where ( $p < 0.05$ ), in all cases. So all three hypotheses find support from the results obtained in the study. From the previous literature it was found that the main concern of parents at the beginning of a child's hospital stay was the child's medical condition, especially the uncertain prognosis. They experienced: feelings of helplessness, shock, disbelief, as well as lack of information, inability to assimilate the information that was provided. Parents clearly showed signs of a physiological stress response, which reduced over time (Soderback & Christensson, 2008). But in our study this was not observed, on the contrary, in cases where the child has been hospitalized only once within this year, the level of anxiety encountered is moderate, and followed by the level of high anxiety and the level of anxiety low. Unlike this, we see that when the child has been hospitalized more than 1 time during the year, the most encountered level of anxiety is the high level, followed by the level of moderate and low anxiety. What is observed for both cases is that the moderate and high level of anxiety predominates and the smallest place is occupied by the low level of anxiety, where very few participants in both cases were presented with this level.

Regarding the above variable of diagnosis (undetermined/determined), in our study, the results showed that the highest mean for self-reporting anxiety levels was presented by parents who had an undetermined diagnosis of the hospitalized child. We are also presented ( $N=0$ )

participants with a low level of anxiety when the diagnosis is undetermined, therefore, turned into a percentage, this means that 0.0% of the participants report a low level of anxiety when their child is hospitalized hospital. (N=12) or 37.5% of participants reported a moderate level of anxiety when their child is hospitalized and the child's diagnosis is undetermined. So it is observed that the highest levels of anxiety in parents are presented in cases where the child's diagnosis is undetermined, while in cases where the diagnosis is determined, most parents present a moderate level of anxiety. The fact that the diagnosis is undetermined, indicates high levels of anxiety in parents can be related to other variables such as the lack of information about the child's illness and not knowing the child's illness even by the medical staff, a procedure cannot be started regular drug treatment for the child and for the parents can be "torturous" not knowing what their child is suffering from, since we are talking about children younger than 2 years old here. All these are assumptions, which can serve as question marks for further research.

Regarding the length of stay in the hospital and the levels of anxiety experienced by the parents, the data determined that 35 parents (N=35) had only 1 day with their child hospitalized, with a M= 2.57 and SD=0.55, while parents who had more than one day with the hospitalized child were 26 (N=26) and have M=2.00; SD = 0.65. So it is observed that the highest average for the self-reporting of anxiety levels is presented by parents whose child has been hospitalized for 1 day (as the duration of the child's hospitalization).

From the analysis of the results it was found that there is a low negative relationship between the age in years of the parent with the level of anxiety reported by the parent, where the Pearson correlation was observed in the value ( $r = -0.452$ ). This means that with increasing age, the level of anxiety reported by the parent whose child is hospitalized decreases and vice versa. \*Parents' age limit was from 18 to 44.

Table 4 Correlation between parental anxiety and socioeconomic status

	Anxiety	Social economic status
Anxiety	1	-.697**

The correlational analysis shows that socioeconomic status (mainly family income) has a moderate negative relationship, where the Pearson Correlation is presented ( $r = -0.69$ ), with the level of anxiety self-reported by parents. This means that the lower the socio-economic status, the higher

the level of anxiety and vice versa, the higher the socio-economic status, the lower the level of anxiety.

Correlational analysis shows that there is a strong negative relationship between the level of education and the level of self-reported anxiety of parents whose child is hospitalized. It is also noted that ( $r = -0.71$ ), so this means that the lower the level of education, the higher the level of self-reported anxiety and vice versa, the higher the level of education, the more the level of anxiety among these parents appears to be low.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

Based on the theoretical discussions and the results of this study, it can be concluded in support of previous researchers' research. We observed associations between hospitalization variables and other variables with self-reported anxiety levels of parents who had hospitalized children (0-2 years). Most participants displayed a moderate level of anxiety. Also, it was noted that the most frequently presented symptoms were: constant feeling of fear, inner feeling of nervousness and insecurity, feeling of tension, crying immediately/too often, loss of appetite, headache, difficulty falling asleep. Parents with a lower socioeconomic status showed higher levels of anxiety during their child's hospitalization compared to parents with a higher socioeconomic status.

Also, parents with a higher level of education presented a more moderate level of anxiety during their child's hospitalization than parents with a lower level of education.

The highest level of anxiety self-reported by parents was presented in cases where the child had been hospitalized for 1 day, while in cases where the child had been hospitalized for more than 1 day, parents self-reported a more moderate level of anxiety.

The highest levels of anxiety in parents are presented in cases where the child's diagnosis is undetermined, while in cases where the diagnosis is determined, most parents present a moderate level of anxiety.

This study paves the way for other studies that can be done with the parents of children who are hospitalized, since in our country the research for this target group is still poor and it is seen as necessary to research more deeply.

As for further recommendations, we can say that in addition to the instruments used in this study, other instruments can also be used, depending on the more specific measurements that will be made and the relationships of the variable hospitalization, anxiety with other variables.

It is also suggested that in other future studies based on the study of the

relationship between hospitalization and anxiety, the target group should also include fathers.

Another suggestion for subsequent studies is related to the inclusion of other variables in the study to see other factors that are more closely related to the anxiety of parents who have hospitalized children. These factors can be: personality traits, other life traumas, other stressful events they may have, genetic factors, physical illness of the parent, etc.

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## **The Level of Anxiety in Pregnant Women During the Covid-19 Pandemic**

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### ***Abstract***

The main purpose of the study is to determine the level of anxiety among pregnant women, who attend the public maternity and private gynaecological clinics in the city of Shkodra, during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, September 2022. The health and psychological consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic have affected the entire population, bringing health and psychological damage, and even the loss of many lives. Pregnant women are a special target group in terms of health, as another creature is being created and growing inside them, as well as from the psychological side with its stresses and hormonal changes. And being such a special and delicate group, the study aimed to determine the level of anxiety among pregnant women during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic and the causes that may affect the possible increase of anxiety in their lives. Part of the sample was 135 pregnant women ranging from the age of 17 to the age of 46. The Beck Anxiety Inventory was used for data collection which is a rating scale used to evaluate the severity of anxiety symptoms. The inventory contains 21 self-report items with a Likert scale ranging from 0 to 3 and raw scores ranging from 0 to 63. The results of the study regarding the level of anxiety showed that 16.3% of the pregnant women who participated in the study were experiencing a low level of anxiety, 47.8% a moderate level of anxiety, and 45.9% a high level of anxiety.

*Key words: Anxiety, COVID-19, Pregnant.*

### **Introduction**

Pregnancy is generally considered a special and pleasant event in women's lives. Despite the fact that it may be desirable for the woman, this does not

mean that it is not associated with stress. Big hormonal and physical changes occur in the woman's body, which is not always pleasant. At the same time, the lifestyle and the dynamics of the daily routine usually change, and these require the woman and the family to adapt. All this means that the emotional states of the pregnant woman cannot always be managed in the best possible way. Experiencing anxiety during pregnancy does not help either the mother or her baby. The factors that can promote the experience of anxiety during pregnancy are many and varied.

A most pregnant woman feels anxious firstly about factors connected with a newborn: “possible neonatal development disorder”, “possible birth trauma to a newborn” and “newborn’s ability to effectively initiate breathing”. Followed by anxiety causes connected to the pregnant woman herself (Deklava et al., 2015).

Many prospective studies have shown that, if a mother is depressed, anxious, or stressed while pregnant, this increases the risk for her child having a wide range of adverse outcomes, including emotional problems, symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or impaired cognitive development (Glover, 2014). Severe anxiety significantly impacts newborns' biological indicators such as height, weight, and head circumference (Glover, 2015).

The effects of anxiety during pregnancy on offspring’s health are serious and thought-provoking to which the need for identifying and screening of anxiety disorders in prenatal care is necessary (Shahhosseini et al., 2015).

*Purpose and objectives of the study:*

- The purpose of this study is to assess the level of anxiety during the pandemic (Covid-19) in pregnant women who attend the public maternity hospital of the city of Shkodra or private gynaecological clinics. Objectives:
- To identify the level of anxiety in pregnant women during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- To compare the level of anxiety between two groups of women, those who have been infected by the virus and those who have not been infected.
- To determine if there is any age group of pregnant women who are more likely to experience higher levels of anxiety.



- To determine if there are differences in the anxiety level of pregnant women according to different variables such as; residence, education, financial income, vaccination, and gestational age.

*Various studies related to anxiety in pregnancy during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic*

Kotabagi et al. (2020) revealed that maternal levels of anxiety at the tail end of the pandemic in the UK appear low, with depression levels following a similar pattern. This is likely to be due to increased available information and reassurance through social media, healthcare professionals, and primary care. Ayaz et al. (2020) aimed to compare the level of anxiety and depression in the same pregnant women before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of patients without anxiety (from 10 to 6) and with mild anxiety (from 31 to 24) decreased and patients with moderate (from 20 to 25) and severe anxiety (from 2 to 8) increased after SARS-CoV-2 infection. Lebel et al. (2020) found substantially elevated anxiety and depression symptoms compared to similar pre-pandemic pregnancy cohorts, with 37% reporting clinically relevant symptoms of depression and 57% reporting clinically relevant symptoms of anxiety. Higher symptoms of depression and anxiety were associated with more concern about threats of COVID-19 to the life of the mother and baby, as well as concerns about not getting the necessary prenatal care, relationship strain, and social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Higher levels of perceived social support and support effectiveness, as well as more physical activity, were associated with lower psychological symptoms. Akgor et al. (2021) aimed to determine the level of anxiety and depression and perspectives of pregnant women during the pandemic. Multivariate analysis showed having anxiety was associated with a high depression score and concern about the inability to reach an obstetrician, and being an advanced age, having a high anxiety score, and concern about the inability to reach an obstetrician demonstrated significant effects on depression score. Tomfohr-Madsen et al. (2021) rapidly reviewed and meta-analysed the worldwide prevalence of depression and anxiety among pregnant women during the COVID-19 pandemic. A systematic search of the literature and meta-analyses were conducted from December 2019 – February 2021 with a total of 46 studies meeting inclusion criteria. Depression was assessed in 37 studies ( $N = 47,677$ ), with a pooled prevalence of 25.6%. Anxiety was assessed in 34 studies ( $N = 42,773$ ), with a pooled prevalence of 30.5%; moderation by time showed that the prevalence of anxiety was higher in studies conducted

later in the pandemic.

## Methods

For this study, it was used non-probability sampling, specifically the convenience sampling type. Pregnant women attending the Shkodra maternity hospital as well as the private gynaecological clinics of the city of Shkodra were selected. The number of subjects participating in the study is 135. The criterion for the sample was being pregnant and residing in the city of Shkodra or its districts.

The instrument used for this study was the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI; Beck et al, 1988). It is a self-report inventory for measuring the severity of anxiety. The scale consists of 21 items, each describing a common symptom of anxiety. It screen for the presence of anxiety symptoms such as heart pounding, nervousness, inability to relax, dizziness, or light-headedness. The respondent is asked to rate how much he or she has been bothered by each symptom over the past week on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (I could barely stand it). Overall total scores of 0–9 indicate normal or no anxiety, scores of 10–18 indicated mild to moderate anxiety, scores 19–29 shown moderate to severe anxiety, and scores 30–63 indicated severe anxiety. For the internal consistency of the scale calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The Cronbach's alpha value was found to be 0.928 in this study.

The pilot study was conducted by a sample of 30 people during the period September 10-12, 2022. During the pilot study, no problems or shortcomings were presented in relation to the questions and the instrument used. The questions were clear and understandable by all categories of participants in the study.

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, standard deviations). They were analysed by SPSS statistical package version 24. Some variables were compared using a t-test or analysis of the variance (ANOVA) test, and for assessment of the relationships between variables is used Pearson correlation analysis. The statistical significance level was accepted as  $p < 0.05$ .

## Results and discussion

### Demographic characteristics of participants

From a total of 135 pregnant women that participated in this study, the

majority of them (63%) were from 21 to 30 years old. 30.4% of them were from 31 to 40 years old. As it was expected the number of pregnant women under 20 years old and over 40 years old was small. Only 2.2% of participants were under 20 years old and 4.4% of them were over 40 years old.

Regarding the place of residence (village or city), the participants in the study have a proportional distribution. Specifically, 53.3% were residents of the city and 46.7% were residents of the village. All the pregnant women were married. 43.7% of participants were employed while 56.3% were unemployed. Participants had different educational levels. 17% of them had finished 9 years of school, 20% had finished high school, 25.2% had a Bachelor's degree and 37.8% had a Master's degree.

#### ***Data related to Covid-19***

47.4 % of participants had passed COVID-19 before pregnancy. 34.1% did not pass COVID-19 before pregnancy and 18.5% did not know if they had passed COVID-19 before pregnancy.

40% of participants had passed COVID-19 during the pregnancy. 50.4% did not pass COVID-19 during pregnancy and 9.6% did not know if they had passed COVID-19 during pregnancy.

The majority of participants (88.1%) have not been vaccinated for the disease Covid-19 before pregnancy. Only 5 participants (3.7%) have been vaccinated once and 11 participants (8.1%) have been vaccinated twice before pregnancy.

The majority of participants (97%) have not been vaccinated for the disease Covid-19 during pregnancy. Only 2 participants (1.5%) have been vaccinated once and also 2 others (1.5) have been vaccinated twice during the pregnancy.

#### ***Anxiety level***

To our knowledge, limited studies have assessed maternal anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic in Albania. The results of this study reveal that the majority of pregnant women (45.9%) had high levels of anxiety. 37.8% had a moderate level of anxiety and 16.3% had a low level of anxiety.

The One-way analysis of variance was applied to test the statistical difference among the respondents with different group ages. The hypothesis is formulated as there is no significant difference in the means score of pregnant women having different group ages regarding their general anxiety level and One Way ANOVA was used. There was no significant

difference in anxiety among the group ages at the  $p < .05$  level for the four groups  $F(3,131) = 1.730$ ,  $p = .164$ . The study of Jeličić et al. (2022) revealed no statistically significant difference comparing maternal age-related to the subjective attitude towards COVID-19-related fear.

The One-way analysis of variance was applied to test the statistical difference among the respondents with different educational levels. The hypothesis is formulated as there is no significant difference in the means score of pregnant women having different educational levels regarding their general anxiety level and One Way ANOVA was used. There was no significant difference in anxiety among the educational levels at the  $p < .05$  level for the four groups  $F(3,131) = 1.348$ ,  $p = .262$ . The study of Maharlouei et al. (2021) revealed that an abnormal anxiety level was more prevalent among pregnant mothers who had university degrees. This may be explained by the fact that pregnant mothers with a high level of education had more awareness about this pandemic's threat and consequences; thus, they are more affected mentally than low-educated pregnant mothers. Durankus and Aksu (2022) reported that low education level was a common associated at-risk factor for depression progression and anxiety symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic

The One-way analysis of variance was applied to test the statistical difference among the respondents with different levels of severity of COVID-19 symptoms. The hypothesis is formulated as no significant difference in the means score of pregnant women having different levels of severity of COVID-19 symptoms regarding their general anxiety level and One Way ANOVA was used. There was a significant difference in anxiety among the severity levels of COVID-19 symptoms at the  $p < .05$  level for the four groups (without symptoms; mild symptoms; moderate symptoms, severe symptoms)  $F(3,61) = 5.203$ ,  $p = .003$ . As the severity of the symptoms increases, the average anxiety experienced by pregnant women also increases.

The One-way analysis of variance was applied to test the statistical difference among the respondents with different knowledge of having passed COVID-19 during their pregnancy. The hypothesis is formulated as no significant difference in the means score of pregnant women having different knowledge of having passed COVID-19 during their pregnancy regarding their general anxiety level and One Way ANOVA was used. There was a significant difference in anxiety among different knowledge of having passed COVID-19 during their pregnancy at the  $p < .05$  level for the three groups (have passed COVID-19 during pregnancy; not have passed

COVID-19 during pregnancy; do not know if have passed COVID-19 during pregnancy)  $F(2,132) = 7.862, p = .001$ . Women having passed COVID-19 during pregnancy had a significantly higher level of anxiety compared with the two other groups. It is important to note that the experience of anxiety during pregnancy is multifactorial, and other factors such as social support, access to healthcare, preexisting mental health conditions, and individual coping mechanisms can also influence anxiety levels.

The One-way analysis of variance was applied to test the statistical difference among the respondents with different economic levels. The hypothesis is formulated as no significant difference in the means score of pregnant women having different economic levels regarding their general anxiety level and One Way ANOVA was used. There was a significant difference in anxiety among different economic levels of pregnant women at the  $p < .05$  level for the three groups (low economic level; moderate economic level, high economic level)  $F(2,132) = 9.796, p = .000$ . As the economic level increases, the average anxiety experienced by pregnant women decreases. It is important to note that the relationship between the two variables (economic level and anxiety) is complex and influenced by various factors. Economic well-being can impact the overall quality of life, including access to healthcare, nutrition, and social support systems, which can contribute to a pregnant woman's mental health.

T-test was applied to test the statistical difference of anxiety among the respondents with different progress of the pregnancy. The mean score of women with problematic progress of pregnancy in the anxiety inventory was higher compared with the mean score of women with the normal progress of the pregnancy. There was a statistically significant difference in anxiety across the progress of pregnancy of participants ( $p < .05$ ). As a conclusion: “There was a significant difference in the score of anxiety for women having problematic progress of their pregnancy ( $M=10.01, SD=11.28$ ) and women having a normal progress of their pregnancy ( $M=38.04, SD=8.76$ );  $t(133) = -3.215, p = .002$ .” Women who have problematic progress in their pregnancy had higher levels of anxiety compared to those who do have a normal progress in their pregnancy. Individual experiences may vary, and not all women with pregnancy complications will necessarily experience high levels of anxiety. Factors such as personal coping mechanisms, social support, and access to healthcare services can also influence anxiety levels during problematic pregnancies

T-test was applied to test the statistical difference of anxiety among the respondents with different places of residence. The mean score of women living in the village in the anxiety inventory was higher compared with the mean score of women living in the city. There was a statistically significant difference in anxiety across the place of residence of participants ( $p < .05$ ). As a conclusion: “There was a significant difference in the score of anxiety for women living in the village ( $M=34.36$ ,  $SD=9.76$ ) and women living in the city ( $M=28.77$ ,  $SD=11.91$ );  $t(133) = -2.953$ ,  $p = .004$ .” Women who lived in the village had higher levels of anxiety compared to those who lived in the city. This result can be explained considering the Albanian context where the health care services offered in the village are limited. Perhaps it is precisely the lack of specialized medical services in the village that promotes the experience of a higher level of anxiety among pregnant women living in the village.

### **Conclusions**

Managing anxiety in pregnant women is crucial for their overall well-being and that of their babies. Anxiety during pregnancy can have negative impacts on both the physical and psychological health of the mother and the development of the baby.

Implementing psychological services specifically tailored to meet the needs of pregnant women is indeed important, especially during the challenging period of the pandemic. Pregnancy can already be a time of heightened emotions and stress, and the added uncertainties and concerns brought by the pandemic can exacerbate anxiety levels. Accessible and comprehensive psychological support services can play a significant role in addressing and managing anxiety in pregnant women.

Maternity and neighborhood health centers are ideal settings to provide such services, as they are often the primary points of contact for prenatal care. Integrating psychological services into these centers can help identify and support pregnant women who may be experiencing anxiety or other mental health concerns. By offering counseling, psychoeducation, and evidence-based interventions, healthcare professionals can provide valuable support to pregnant women throughout their pregnancy journey.

In addition to professional services, family support is indeed crucial in motivating pregnant women to overcome challenges they may face. Emotional support, understanding, and encouragement from family members can significantly alleviate anxiety and provide a sense of security and well-being for pregnant women.

Overall, a comprehensive approach that includes psychological services, family support, and accessible healthcare can contribute to promoting the mental health and well-being of pregnant women, thereby benefiting both the mother and the baby.

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## **The Impact of Anxiety on Teaching Process of Teachers During the Online Learning**

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### **Abstract**

Anxiety is the total reaction of human being to threat or danger. Every anxiety experience involves a perception of danger, thoughts of harm, and a physiological alarm and activation process. Anxiety does not feel the same for everyone. Individuals may experience some of the physical symptoms and some of the psychological symptoms, reflecting the effects in different areas of their lives. The purpose of this study was to explore how returning to teaching during the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic impacted teachers' anxiety. The present study included 178 elementary teachers from 333 that was the total number of participants. Teachers were randomly selected in the city of Elbasan and ranged in age from 29 to 63 years. The purpose of this study is to address the importance of anxiety in the teaching process of teachers through online teaching. In this study, quantitative methods were used; the data were collected through the Beck Anxiety Inventory. The results of the study show the importance of factors that affect different symptoms, specifically rapid heartbeat that teachers experienced. Based on the results, the study also gives some recommendations for motivating teachers to reduce the symptoms of anxiety, such as encouragement, positive climate, etc.

*Key words: Anxiety, Teacher, Distance learning.*

### **Introduction**

#### *Conceptual and theoretical framework*

Pandemic is the phenomenon where its effects are influential in the aspects of life. People differ in how they cope with certain events. Specifically, the pandemic resulted in a tremendous impact on all spheres of life. Experiencing a pandemic is an experience that deeply affects people, causing them to experience symptoms of anxiety. These reactions can be perceived as a normal response at first and can become a serious mental

health problem.

In order to adapt to the situation in which they were, the teachers had to make changes in their way of teaching, in the way of communication they use with the students. distance learning requires more attention from the teacher to make the entire learning process possible. Traditional learning is focused on the classroom conversations that take place between the teacher and students and the various activities that take place in the classroom. During the learning process in the classroom, the teacher has the student face to face, while distance learning takes place through technological devices, which are used to keep the students in contact with the teachers.

This study seeks to describe and analyze the level of anxiety experienced by teachers during distance learning.

### **Related research**

#### *a. The concept of anxiety*

Anxiety is a response to external or internal stimuli that can have behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and physical symptoms. People with anxiety usually have recurrent intrusive thoughts or worries. They may avoid certain situations out of anxiety and may also have physical symptoms such as sweating, shaking, dizziness or rapid heartbeat (Olatunji, B. 2022). Anxiety is defined as pathological when it occurs inadequately or with much more pronounced severity and debilitating features. (Ekman, P. 1982). It is important to consider that the concept of anxiety refers to numerous mental and physiological phenomena, including the conscious state of a person's worry about an unwanted event in the future, or fear of a current situation. Anxiety and fear are closely related. Some researchers see anxiety as a uniquely human emotion and fear as common to non-human species. Another distinction commonly made between fear and anxiety is that fear is an adaptive response to realistic threat, while anxiety is a pervasive emotion, sometimes an irrational or exaggerated reaction to perceived current or future threat. (Dwight L. Evans, Edna B. Foa, Raquel E. Gur, Herbert Hendin, Charles P. O'Brien, Daniel Romer, Martin E.P. Seligman & B. Timothy Walsh. 2017).

#### *b. Anxiety and experiences in teachers*

Teachers' anxiety is defined as a feeling of tension before, during and after the teaching process. It can be said that anxiety has negative effects on the effectiveness of teaching, the working environment, the behavior of the teacher. In addition, the anxiety of teachers causes failure, decline in academic performance, inability to concentrate on lessons, avoidance of

personal relationships. and social environments. In addition, teachers tend to pass their anxiety onto their students, avoid new teaching methods and techniques, and experience burnout. (Aydın, S 2021). Teachers are the social structure that holds the education system together, and therefore it is important to protect their skills and capacity to fulfill their role as teachers.

*c. Teaching and its types*

Teaching is an interactive process, which mainly includes the classroom conversation that takes place between the teacher and the student, and takes place during some defined activities, where its main components are content, communication and feedback (Rajagopalan, I 2019). Teaching and learning in the classroom is a complex, multi-layered and social experience. Many things happen at the same time, the students and the teacher have to interpret and process these events with considerable speed. Teaching is not a one-way transmission of information, because students influence the process as much as the teacher.

*Purpose of the study*

The aim of this study is to identify the anxiety experienced by elementary school teachers in the city of Elbasan during distance learning.

*Objectives and research questions of the study*

In accordance with the purpose of the study, there are two objectives have been set, which will be met through several research questions, which are:

*Objective no. 1:* To identify the level of anxiety experienced by teachers during distance learning.

*Research question no. 1:* What is the level of anxiety experienced by teachers during distance learning?

*Objective no. 2:* To determine the weight of the two components of anxiety, the physical component and the psychological component, experienced by teachers during distance learning.

*Research question no. 2:* What is the weight of the physical component and the psychological component of anxiety?

**Method and material**

*Sampling:* The participants in the study were 178 from 333 teachers of seven schools of the city of Elbasan. The teachers were selected randomly. The age of the selection was from 29 to 63 years  $M=45.5$ . The distributed questionnaires were 178 ( $N = 178$ ) teachers in an unequal way between genders where  $n = 141$  were female and  $n = 37$  male. In terms of residence, all teachers ( $N=178$ ) were from Elbasan.

Table 1. Descriptive data on age

Year	N	Minimum	Maximum	Arithmetic mean
Total	178	24	63	45.5

The sampling age of 178 teachers had a minimum age of 24 years and a maximum age of teachers of 63 years. The average age of the teachers was 45.5 years.

*Instrument:* The Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) was used as an instrument for the study. The BAI is a short list that describes 21 anxiety symptoms. The instrument used with the teachers was composed of two sections: Demographic data and anxiety.

*Data analysis:* The instrument was applied in 7 elementary schools in the city of Elbasan. Their processing and analysis were carried out through SPSS and Excel programs. To carry out the study, descriptive data analysis was used regarding the frequency of repetition of events, the weight of each factor, the average level of anxiety and the deviation from the average. Correlational analysis to see the relationship between variables.

## Results

In this chapter, the findings of the study obtained from the application of the questionnaire will be presented. The purpose of this paper was to identify the anxiety experienced by elementary school teachers in the city of Elbasan during distance learning. All data has been analyzed for maximum accuracy. Also, each objective and research question were analyzed clarifying any assumptions related to the data analysis.

*Findings of study objective number one:* To identify the level of anxiety experienced by teachers during distance learning.

This objective is realized through several research questions that give the assessment and importance of the symptoms that affected the anxiety of teachers during distance learning.

*Research question no. 1: What is the level of anxiety experienced by teachers during distance learning?*

Referring to the descriptive data of anxiety, we see that of the 178 teachers who completed the questionnaires with a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 3, there is an average of the symptoms they experienced equal to  $M = 13.72$  and standard deviation  $DS = 17.47$ .

*Research question no. 2: What is the level of anxiety experienced by teachers during distance learning based on age?*

The data presented in the table above show that the age group that had the

highest participation in the study is the age group of 41-50 years. While the age group that had the lowest participation in the study is over 60 years old. The teachers who had the highest level of anxiety based on age are the teachers of the 31-40 age group with an anxiety level of 14.4. While the age group of teachers who have the lowest level of anxiety is the age group over 60 years old with an anxiety level of 8. Regarding gender, female teachers had an anxiety level of 14.3, while male teachers had 11.2.

*Findings of study objective number two:* To determine the weight of the two components of anxiety, the physical component and the psychological component, experienced by teachers during distance learning.

From the data it was found that the physical component has a total anxiety of 7.3 and with a difference of -46% from the general average of anxiety which is 13.72.

While the psychological component resulted in a total anxiety of 6.5 and with a difference of -53% from the general average of anxiety which is 13.72. So we can say that in the study sample of 178 teachers, the average level of anxiety is 13.72% and this population consists mainly of women, where the dominant age is 41-50 years, and the main form of education is the 4-year system.

## **Discussion**

*Discussion on research objective no. 1.* To identify the level of anxiety experienced by teachers during distance learning.

From the discussion of the results of the research questions for the realization of the first objective to identify the level of anxiety experienced by teachers during distance learning Referring to the analysis of the results it was observed that from the sample of 178 teachers who completed the questionnaires with a minimum 0 and a maximum of 3 has an average of symptoms experienced anxiety level equal to  $M = 13.72$ . Accordingly, based on the scoring of Beck's inventory, teachers experienced a "mild" level of anxiety during distance learning.

*Discussion on research objective no. 2-* To determine the weight of the two components of anxiety, the physical component and the psychological component, experienced by teachers during distance learning.

After examining each symptom of the physical component of anxiety, it was observed that the physical component has a total anxiety of 7.3 and with a difference of -46% from the overall mean of anxiety which is 13.72. So considering only the physical symptoms, we have a "minimal" level of anxiety. While affecting the psychological aspect of anxiety, it was

observed that the psychological components have a total anxiety of 6.5 and with a difference of -53% from the overall average of anxiety which is 13.72. Referring to Beck's inventory, since only psychological symptoms have been taken into consideration, we can say that we are dealing with a "minimal" level of anxiety experienced by teachers.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

When people experience anxiety, they usually have thoughts or worries. They may avoid certain situations out of worry and may also have physical or psychological symptoms.

Some recommendations are:

- ✚ Awareness of the community and school staff about the importance of psycho-social services and information about them.
- ✚ Increasing the number of specialists in schools, whose focus is identifying various problems that affect and increase the level of anxiety and ensuring their social well-being.
- ✚ Providing work and meeting the basic material needs of teachers at work during online learning.
- ✚ Adequate training of teachers on the use of digital resources to update their skills.

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**SESSION IV**  
**SOCIAL WORK PRACTICES AND**  
**SOCIAL POLICIES**





## **Current Housing Programs for Vulnerable Groups, in Shkodra Municipality**

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### **Abstract**

The fulfillment of the need for housing is considered one of the most important human rights, also reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and involved in many other legal instruments of international law. It is precisely the multidimensional feature of this right, that has also brought obstacles to its concretization, especially to the vulnerable groups.

In the current Law on Social Housing in the Republic of Albania, some of its articles set out the opportunities offered to the most vulnerable groups and the obligations that local governments have for the implementation of this law. Starting from 2014, the programs of Housing in the Municipality of Shkodër are part of the Office of Social Services, Housing and Public Health and this sector is represented only with one housing specialist. Already, more and more housing programs are being combined with social ones, in aid to layer with vulnerable. The municipality has been very active and has supported the development of some social programs such as: lease subsidy in the free market; subsidizing credit interests; Financial instrument of immediate grant as well as social/container housing. Exactly, in this paper based on the analysis of the documentation will present in detail the way of functioning, benefiting and implementing each of these programs and focusing on the achievements, the challenges facing the local government in an attempt to meet the need to housing the additions with it marginalized, as well as the panorama of future plans related to the

social housing service.

*Key words: Achievement, Challenges, Future, Housing programs, Vulnerable groups.*

### **Introduction**

The right to shelter is a right guaranteed by the constitution and by law, where every individual has the right to have a shelter to live. In our country, we must take into account the significant economic problems, difficulties in finding work, the needs of each individual, group or community, not only in the applicability of the legal framework. Housing remains a major challenge for our society.

Housing is an important component in family empowerment as it helps improve resilience and contributions of sustainability of family members. In Albania, the family is the basis of society and its support affects a better society.

Everyone has the right to a standard of living suitable for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, shelter and medical care and thus social services and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

The provision of social housing includes the construction, development, allocation, provision and management of social rental housing schemes, as well as the ownership of social housing. Clearly this is a service provided by the government on behalf of that part of the population who can benefit from social assistance as part of wider social policy schemes, with housing benefits also provided to help families on low incomes, low paying rent - Housing Europe 2016.

Since 2014, housing programs in Shkoder Municipality are part of the Office of Social Services, Housing and Public Health. More and more, housing programs are being combined with social programs to help the most vulnerable. The municipality has recently supported the development of several social programs such as: social/container housing for the Roma community, adaptation of the former dormitory building of the Forestry School for social apartments for persons with orphan status, reconstruction of housing for the Egyptian community or rent subsidy in the free market.

Precisely, in this paper, which is based on document analysis, we will present in detail the way of operation, benefit and implementation of each of these programs.

## **Methods**

The purpose of this paper is to, through the review of relevant literature in the field and the analysis of secondary data, familiarize ourselves with the achievements and challenges of those residents of Shkoder Municipality, who have benefited from social housing programs.

The main objectives are:

- Acquaintance with the general situation of social housing policies in our country.
- Acquaintance with housing programs for vulnerable groups in Shkodër Municipality and the procedures to become beneficiaries.
- Achievements and challenges faced by municipal employees and the beneficiaries of the housing programs themselves

Main questions: a) What progress have the housing policies in our country had during these 30 years of democracy? b) What are some of the social housing programs for vulnerable groups that Shkodër Municipality is implementing and how are they organized? c) What achievements and challenges are evident by the providers and beneficiaries of these housing programs for vulnerable groups in Shkodër Municipality?

## **Housing policy developments in Albania after the 90s**

After the fall of the communist system, the Albanian government of 1991 pursued a series of radical reforms. A very high number of the population left Albania, where about 700,000 people had left the country. Also during the 1990s many of the rural population migrated to urban areas, to seek a better future and therefore a better economy (Tsenkova, S., & Andoni, D. 2017:39).

Housing reforms in Albania consisted of the privatization of state-owned housing and construction enterprises and the reduction of fiscal subsidies for the housing sector. Privatization of state housing/enterprises for tenants at token prices had a significant impact in urban areas, where it accounted for 96% of the stock. Government programs aimed to provide housing to 'homeless' families through housing schemes.

Housing construction became the main contributor to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP); however, due to the lack of institutional capacity to manage rapid urbanization and the laissez-faire attitude towards the private sector, 80–90% of new housing built after 1990 was developed informally. According to the 2011 CENSUS, less than 6% of households live in a rental apartment and there is extreme overcrowding (dwellings with 3 or more occupants per room) in 3.74% of the housing stock

(INSTAT 2011).

In the early 1990s, due to demographic changes in the areas of Tirana, Durres, informal settlements doubled. Government support for housing in the last 20 years has been provided in the form of housing subsidies for soft loans given to individuals, in most cases for the purchase of housing built by the National Housing Agency (NHA). Since 1995 there has been a marked decline in state housing support, when World Bank loan disbursements peaked.

The increase in financing in 2009 is attributed to the disbursement of loans from the Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB) for new social rental housing. Between 1993 and 2016, about 20,000 families were sheltered with state support.

The shortage of affordable housing in large urban areas is estimated at 100,000 dwellings. A high vacancy rate of 22% coupled with overcrowding of the urban poor are also signs of housing market imbalances. The massive privatization of public housing has resulted in high rates of home ownership in the country (93.5%). State-owned rental housing accounts for 0.2% of total housing—a significant change from 35% in 1989. Increased housing market activity accompanied by higher lending in 2008 left Albanian banks somewhat vulnerable to the crisis global finance, as housing was used as collateral for business credit. In 2017, housing loans accounted for 66% of all lending to individuals.

Local authorities are expected to play a critical role in providing social housing and housing allowances. The Act on Social Housing (2004) aims to increase the capacity of municipalities to manage the design, implementation, distribution and maintenance of housing services for socially disadvantaged families. However, the consolidation of fiscal authority at the level of central government means that the instruments available to local governments are more limited. Revenues from local government sources are weak, and national rules determine most municipal revenue and spending patterns and place limits on municipal borrowing and capital investment. Albania was administratively divided into 374 commune/municipalities until 2015, recently these administrative units have been consolidated into 61 municipalities, to address the problems of territorial fragmentation and inefficiency in the provision of services. Albanian municipalities lack sufficient budget revenues to fulfill their mandate.

Housing in our country has become an important part of the public debate. The government has drawn up a strategy for housing from 2016-2025, in

three areas of provision: social housing for rent; low-cost housing; and a land-based infrastructure program. In addition, the government responded positively to the idea of housing subsidies, subsidized loans, small grants and immediate grants with specific target groups in mind (Feshti, M., Golemi, E., & Petriti, G. 2019: 245-246).

However, Albania continues to face problems in pursuing such a strategy. Among them is the development of accurate statistical data on the number of families that need this service. Moreover, based on the literature related to this issue, we can confidently state that there is a problem of institutional management capacities.

Another problem we have to face is the availability of sufficient financial resources. As we have identified in the introduction, the capacity and availability of capital to help individuals and families in need is a key part of the practical implementation of the social housing strategy, however in Albania the financial resources are small compared to the scale of the demands of those in need.

However, it is important to take into account the vision, policies and strategic priorities that the government, together with the relevant institutions, is undertaking. Law No. 22/2018 on social housing, which aims to implement the 2016-2025 strategy, is one of the most important acts in the implementation of social housing programs in Albania.

The purpose of this law is to define the rules and administrative procedures involved in the planning, provision, administration and distribution of social housing programs in order to create affordable and suitable housing opportunities. The goal of the 2016-2025 strategy is to: Provide low and middle income families who cannot afford a home on the open market and in particular, families with indicators of vulnerability resulting in housing exclusion, available, accessible, affordable and quality housing solutions (Feshti, M., Golemi, E., & Petriti, G. 2019: 247-250).

### **Current housing programs of Shkodër Municipality**

Since 2014 in Shkoder Municipality, housing programs are an important part of it. Housing programs have alternated with social programs for the needy, with significant economic problems and vulnerable groups such as the Roma/Egyptian community, etc (UNDP 2017: 49).

Pursuant to law no. 22/2018 "On Social Housing" and the Decision of the Council of Ministers, Shkoder Municipality implements some of the social housing programs, which aim to create suitable and affordable housing opportunities for families in need of housing.

Shkoder Municipality implements social housing programs: "Social housing for rent" with the financial instrument in support of "Subsidy of rent in the free market" and "Low-cost housing" with the financial instrument in support of "Subsidy of loan interests, facilitated by the state".

- *Rent subsidy in the free market as a financial instrument* of the social housing program "Social housing for rent", supports individuals/families whose income cannot afford the payment of real rent in the free market. The rent subsidy is realized by the municipality when there is no social housing for rent and when there are no funds for new investments or the purchase of housing in the market.

- *Loan interest subsidy*, facilitated by the state, in support of the social housing program "Low cost housing".

Families benefiting from low-cost housing have the right to benefit from a loan with favorable conditions, which is given in the form of a loan interest subsidy for those families who cannot afford the loan payments offered by financial institutions for the purchase of a house with their income housing with a value not greater than the average market value in the Local Self-Government Unit and with an area not greater than the defined housing rates.

Shkoder Municipality has 100 quotas and during the three years of the implementation of this social program, by decision of the Municipal Council, three lists of beneficiaries have been approved. Beneficiary lists, according to the tripartite agreement between the Ministry of Finance and Economy, Shkoder Municipality and three financial institutions/banks (BKT, Intesa San Paolo and Raiffeisen Bank), in accordance with legal procedures, have been sent to financial institutions and National Housing, Enforcement authority, Shkodër Regional Directorate.

So far there are some beneficiaries credited by the banks and some beneficiaries in the process of crediting. While some beneficiaries of the list of the reserve fund approved by the municipality have submitted a request for postponement of the deadline in accordance with the legal provisions.

- *The financial instrument of the immediate grant*, which the individual benefits from, is 10% of the sale price of the low-cost apartment.

Requests to benefit from the immediate grant are submitted to the Shkoder Municipality, which after completing the documentation and assessment result in fulfilling the defined criteria by certifying the relevant status, pursuant to point 11 of VKM no. 555, dated 15.07.2020 "On the procedures, criteria and priorities for granting the immediate grant for low-

cost housing from the state budget", who are approved as beneficiaries of this fund by decision of the Municipal Council. Procedures for disbursement of this fund are followed after approval by the line ministry.

The municipality of Shkoder administers three Social Housing for Rent, part of the public fund of social housing for rent owned by the municipality, which have 79 housing units in total, benefiting about 69 families located near these social housing.

Pursuant to the Cooperation Agreement that the Municipality of Shkoder has concluded with the Ministry of Urban Development, the reconstruction of the former dormitory of the Forestry School has been carried out, with the aim of adapting it to social housing for rent for the housing of orphans who have left social care institutions and are currently living in city dormitories, as well as single-parent families who have dependent children and are in a difficult socio-economic situation.

By decisions of the Municipal Council, the lists of beneficiaries at the Community Center "For the Family" no. 6 (former dormitory of the Forestry school) who have signed 1-year lease contracts.

Beneficiaries near these apartments also benefit from integrative and developmental services, with the aim of social-economic empowerment, services offered by the Community Center "For the Family" no. 6. There are about 24 housing units for rent where individuals/families benefit, in terms of the need for housing (Report Social Office Shkoder Municipality 2022: 18-19).

According to the UNDP study of 2016, in Shkoder no Roma people made their living from a regular salary, compared to 13.9% of Egyptians. The majority 44.4% survived by begging and 38.8% with income from temporary and part-time work. This fact has encouraged local institutions to draw up plans to help these communities.

The social housing project "Reconstruction of buildings owned by local self-government units for social housing (New construction, social building, with 1+1 and 2+1 containers)" aimed at improving the housing conditions of the Roma community has been completed. for 27 Roma families in Shkoder Municipality. Lease contracts have been signed with the beneficiary families and currently 23 beneficiary families have been settled near these social buildings, by decision of the Municipal Council (Dhëmbo, E. Xhaho,A. Azizaj,E. Bruka, Sh. Kodra,B. Veizi,M. Vila,F. 2017: 51-61).

The project of adapting the former dormitory of the Veterinary School into social housing has been completed.

The municipality of Shkoder has applied for the program of social housing for rent, adaptation of the existing building, because the building was in urgent need of reconstruction. From this project, 28 social housing units have been reconstructed. This project has been approved by the line ministry with co-financing with Shkoder municipality. By the decision of the Municipal Council, the list of beneficiaries with 26 families near these social housing for rent has been approved. The rent level for the three social housing units for rent, part of the public fund owned by the municipality, has been approved. The rent level for Social Housing for Rent is approved every year and is valid until January 31 of the following year.

#### **Familiarity with documentation and procedures for completion to benefit from social housing programs**

Pursuant to the Decision of the Council of Ministers (VKM) no. 384, dated 12.06.2019 "On determining the documentation to obtain housing under each social housing program and the deadlines for approval procedures by local self-government bodies", the criteria and procedures to obtain housing according to each program are defined.

The conditions that must be met in order to benefit from housing programs are: to be a resident of Shkoder Municipality, to have reached the age of 18; not to own a home; having insufficient income to afford rent in the free market; to have insufficient income to cover the payment of the loan offered by financial institutions; insufficient income to cover the payments according to the sale-purchase contract or the loan of the apartment; not have previously benefited from programs for granting grants or for discounting the value of the apartment due to family status.

#### **Procedures to benefit from social housing programs:**

*The first stage* involves filling out the standard application/request form to be treated with accommodation. Every citizen who meets the criteria for application must go to the One Stop Office to complete the application/request form.

Evaluation of application forms and notification of applicants who meet the criteria to benefit from one of the social housing programs as well as those who do not meet these criteria, who have a deadline of 7 days to fill in the defects or deficiencies.

While the *second phase* in summary includes:

Classification of housing requests according to the scoring system;  
Submission of documentation; Review and verification of documentation;



The responsible housing structure in the Municipality classifies requests according to the scoring system, approved by decision of the Shkoder Municipal Council, and reviews the documentation submitted by each applicant and then sends it to the Housing Commission for evaluation and further review; Sending the list of beneficiaries to the Shkoder Municipal Council for approval; Notice and right of appeal;

Any applicant who has not met the criteria to be part of the beneficiary list, is notified by the structure responsible for housing in the Municipality and can submit a complaint to the Mayor.

### Results and Discussion

Housing programs have brought good things to the residents of Shkodër, in terms of ease of living. The beneficiaries of these programs are the age group 30-40 years old in terms of the low-cost social housing program and in terms of the program of social housing for rent the main beneficiaries are the age group 41-50 years old.

Below is data for two years of housing program applications.

Table 1 (Municipality)

<b>Program data/ Years</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>
No. refugees per year	16	69
No. of application to the municipality for social housing	142	217
The number applications for social housing with low-cost	88	147
The number applications for social housing with rental	60	70

As noted in the above table no. of sheltered persons for 2021 is 16, while for 2022 it is 69. The number of applications to Shkoder Municipality for 2021 has been 142, while for 2022 an increase is seen where the number of applications has gone to 217.

The number of applications for low-cost social housing for 2021 is 88, while for 2022 it is 147. As for the number of applications for social housing for rent for 2021, it is 60, while for 2022 it is 70.

As for housing applications for 2023, there are none, as the Ministry of Finance has requested that these applications be made with a unified system throughout Albania, but this system is still not in operation and this has led to no application has been accepted so far, as we are in the month of May.

A special program has been made for the Roma/Egyptian community resident in Shkoder Municipality. The social housing project "Social Building" has been completed during the period 2019-2020.

- *The challenges faced to benefit from housing programs are:*

Regarding "social housing for rent", the challenge remains the lack of completion of the documentation, such as the lack of submission of the notarized rental contract, within the 2-month deadline defined in the law.

As for "low-cost housing", a challenge remains the delays created by institutions such as the Cadaster to answer whether the person who applied for this program has ownership in his/her name or not. Also a problem for applicants who applied for loans in 2022, is the postponement of the deadline that was made to give applicants more time to complete the documentation for this program. It is expected that the applications for 2022 will be reviewed as soon as the new municipal council is constituted.

Another problem is the difficulty in using the online government platform e-Albania by citizens/applicants, the lack of information about the operation of the services required to complete the required documentation. Many of the citizens/applicants inform and report that they do not have access to the platform and do not know about the concrete and correct use of the platform. There are problems with the online operation of the platform and with the updating of services. There are delays from the relevant institutions in the electronic generation of documents and in issuing certifications and returning answers.

## **Conclusions**

This paper showed the progress that has had during these 30 years of transition, the need for housing, the impact that demographic movements have had and the policies that the Albanian state has followed for housing the population. Also, in recent years, development plans have been drawn up for vulnerable groups, for the Roma/Egyptian minorities in terms of housing.

Special housing provisions and broad non-discrimination clauses, coupled with a determination to do something to improve the living conditions of the Roma and Egyptian minorities, have led to an improvement in the

housing situation for these groups.

The housing programs had a positive impact on the community, as can be seen from the data of the Shkoder Municipality, where the number of applications has increased. This has undoubtedly improved the living conditions of the beneficiaries of these programs. Also, the variety of housing programs made available by Shkoder Municipality helps many groups that need these programs.

This paper also highlighted various problems that have to do with completing the documentation to the failure to establish a unifying system for housing programs throughout Albania. Also, the delay in the electronic generation of documents, the hacking of the e-Albania platform that did not work for a relatively long time. All these brought delays in finalizing housing programs.

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## **Factors that Increase Dropout School in Albania**

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### **Abstract**

Dropping out of school is a complex problem that involves poverty, ethnicity, family situation and composition, the level of education and employment of parents but also cultural and social issues and is geographically extended. Studies show that dropping out of school has a negative impact not only on children and families but also on schools and communities. According to Baker (2001) “The negative impact of dropping out of school results in a less educated workforce, costs associated with higher rates of criminal activity, lost businesses as a result of youth shoplifting, and higher government spending for social services”. In addition to individual factors, family, school and other contextual factors have been identified as risk factors for dropping out of school. Family factors include poverty, family conflict, parental education, parental attitudes toward education, and parental involvement in their child's education. The purpose of this study is to create a profile of school dropout. The following methods were used to collect the data: (1) analysis of studies and reports related to the situation of children who have dropped out of school in Albania and an analysis of the legal framework related to the treatment of the problem, (2) a survey of 141 children from 6 cities in Albania and (3) an open discussion with experts in the field, representatives of the institutions responsible for the administration of the benefit scheme provided for in VKM no. 666. The data showed that the main reasons why children do not attend school are closely related to the family and community context. Almost half of the children, 49% do not attend school for economic reasons, 15% because they do not like school and 10% because the family does not let them. Other identified reasons are the fact that children work, take care of sick family members or sisters and brothers, they have school far away or they have problems with school registration. The contribution of community, parents and every member of

society has a direct impact on strengthening and increasing efficiency of the school dropout prevention scheme.

Increasing awareness and continuing information about programs to support children with scholarships or services to facilitate their going to school should be an integral part of informing and raising awareness of public opinion on issues of school dropout.

*Key words: Dropout school, Raising awareness, Roma and Egyptian children.*

### **Introduction**

Studies show that dropping out of school has a negative impact not only on children and families but also on schools and communities. According to Baker "The negative impact of dropping out of school results in a less educated workforce, costs associated with higher rates of criminal activity, lost businesses as a result of youth shoplifting, and higher government spending for social services (Baker et al. 2001).

In addition to individual factors, family, school and other contextual factors have been identified as risk factors for dropping out of school. Family factors include poverty, family conflict, parental education, parental attitudes toward education, and parental involvement in their child's school/education (Malcolm et al. 2003; Romero and Lee 2008).

School factors include curriculum, poor teaching, negative school environment, interpersonal conflict or poor relationships with teachers, school dissatisfaction, school disciplinary practices, and threats to physical safety such as bullying. (Corville-Smith et al. 1998; Malcolm et al. et al. 2003).

Prominent community factors include delinquent peer relationships (Henry and Huizinga 2007), employment and other community opportunities, neighborhood characteristics and level of organization, levels of social support, community norms, and community violence. (Bowen et al. 2002; Lyon and Cotler 2007; MacDonald and Marsh 2007).

There are many reasons why children leave school before the end of the 9th grade in Albania, such as: the difficult economic situation; health problems and disability; low educational level of parents; distance of schools from residential centers; immigration of parents; demographic movements of the population; mentality; bloodshed; social problems; the use of children for work inside and outside the family; irresponsibility of teachers and school leaders; unqualified and insufficient work with parents to enroll children in

school; non-implementation of legal and sub-legal acts in force; non-attendance of kindergarten by preschoolers; the family, economic and social circumstances of the Roma and Egyptian parents, etc. In some extreme cases, dropping out of school comes from abused, trafficked or exploited children. (Observatory for the Rights of Children and Youth)

Although the enrollment rate of school-age children in our country is over 99%, there is evidence that many children do not enroll in school or fail to complete basic education. The reasons why children leave school before the end of the 9th grade are many: the pressure to contribute to the family income, the pressure to marry and start a family, the social pressure from the dropouts, the pressure of the family to contribute to household chores and take care of younger siblings or relatives, the distance from home to school, especially at the lower secondary level, etc. In some extreme cases, school dropout comes from abused, trafficked or exploited children.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to create a typology of out of school children. For the drafting of this study, the following methodology were followed:

#### *1. Analysis of existing reports/ literature review:*

The literature studied in this report includes all the legal documents that determine the procedures for students to attend compulsory education, the procedures for the registration/return to school of children who are identified as not registered in school or are children in a street situation.

#### *2. Questionnaire with children who have dropped out of school or are at risk of dropping out of school:*

The questionnaire with children was intended to collect the concrete experiences of children who have dropped out of school completely or partially or are at risk of dropping out. Based on the social ecological model, the questionnaire aimed to collect children's perceptions regarding their family environment, school life and community.

### **Analysis of existing reports/ literature review: Legal Framework**

The right to education is guaranteed by the constitution in the Republic of Albania. All citizens of the Republic of Albania and foreign citizens residing in Albania, at the proper age defined by law, are provided with the opportunity to attend educational institutions without any kind of discrimination due to gender, race, color, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, political beliefs, or religious status, economic or social status, kinship, age, place of residence, disability, health status, any other citizen

status, or for other reasons defined in Albanian legislation.

The Law “On the pre-university education system in the Republic of Albania” (no. 69 dated 21.06.2012 and updated in 2021) in its general principles stipulates that “The principle of inclusion of students is applied in all educational institutions and every student is provided with the right to quality education, as well as equal opportunities for education.”

Article 63 of the same law pays special attention to the inclusion in public education of all children with disabilities.

Article 68 of the law stipulates that: “non-registration and unreasonable absences of the child in school for more than 25 percent of classes during a school year are considered as a case of parental negligence and are treated in accordance with law 18/2017 “On child rights and protection”.

Article 24 of this law states that “In case a child, within the age for which compulsory education is provided, avoids education, in order to carry out activities prohibited, the educational staff, under legal obligation, immediately notifies the parent or guardian, as well as the child protection unit, who take immediate measures to get the child back to school.” The same law defines a series of obligations of the MES and its subordinate institutions, among others to enable the child access to preschool education, as well as compulsory education for all children, even in cases where children may have passed the age for compulsory education but have been unable to attend it.

MES Instruction no. 17, dated 09.05.2018 "On the procedures for compulsory education attendance by students who have not attended at least two levels (grades) of basic education and for part-time education in elementary education", facilitates the procedures of enrollment / return to school of children who, for the circumstances set out in the instruction, have not attended elementary education for at least two school years, have dropped out of school, are identified as not enrolled in school or are children in a street situation. Children and youth of Roma and Egyptian background are benefiting from this instruction.

Council of Minister Decision (CMD) 666 of 10/10/2019 “On the financial food quotas in canteens and dormitories and defining of the scholarship and financial support criteria for students of pre-university education in public educational institutions” helps to provide scholarships, financial support for children who are enrolled in basic education, who due to financial distress cannot attend elementary education and are at risk of dropping out.

The institutional framework that handles, monitors and organizes the process of identification and registration of children who reach the

compulsory school age in education in relation to children dropping out of school; is based on the Cooperation Agreement between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Social Work, Issues and Equal Opportunities issued in 2013; and renewed in 2018.

The M4M document is a four-Ministerial cooperation agreement for the identification and school registration of all children of compulsory school age. This agreement divides and includes the responsibility of all four institutions for the pursuit of basic education for children of compulsory school age. This agreement was signed on 10/09/2013

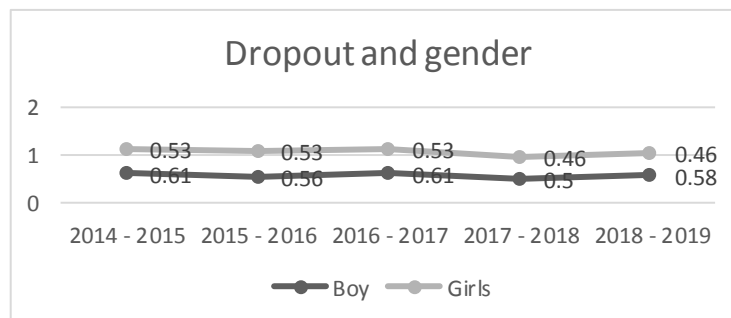
**The situation of dropping out of school at the national level.**

School dropout remains a significant problem in Albania. According to MES reports 16,697 students of compulsory education age in the country quitted school during the period 2010- 2019. The phenomenon of school dropout is similarly spread in both rural and urban areas and with insignificant differences between the sexes. According to National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) data, the participation rate of children in compulsory education during 2019 was 93.9%, while in 2018 this indicator was 95.6%.

Figure 1. Dropout of school during 2011 - 2018

School Year	2011 2012	2012 2013	2013 2014	2014 2015	2015 2016	2016 2017	2017 2018
<b>Dropout in absolute terms</b>	1474	1533	2199	2071	1767	1881	1540
<b>Dropout in %</b>	0.37	0.39	0.58	0.57	0.55	0.57	0.48

Figure 2. Dropout and gender



Various research studies and reports that analyze the causes and Typology



of children at risk of dropping out of school indicate the following categories as the ones with the highest risk of dropout:

- a. children with disabilities
- b. children returning from emigration
- c. children with various social problems
- d. children from Roma and Egyptian communities
- e. children working to help their families
- f. child victims of violence and trafficking
- g. survivors of sexual abuse
- h. abandoned children, etc.

According to MES data, the municipalities with the highest number of dropouts in the school year 2017 - 2018 were: Korça 2.33%, Dibra 1.33% and Kruja 1.21%, while Vlora, Përmet, Has, Kolonja, and Peqin had a zero-dropout rate. A pilot study of the Observatory conducted in Shkodra, Tirana, and Berat indicated that school dropout is higher in poorer counties, among Roma and Egyptian children and in areas with poor access due to difficult terrain and infrastructure. (Observatori për të Drejtat e Fëmijëve 2015).

A monitoring report by the Commissioner for Protection against Discrimination reported that disabled children of school age not attending school were found in the Fier, Lezha and Durrës (Komisioneri për mbrojtjen nga Diskriminimi (2020) “Raport monitorimi me fokus të veçantë fëmijët në arsim”). In the RDPE of Durrës, according to the same report, there were 318 Romani children and 211 Egyptian children that did not attend compulsory preuniversity education during 2018 - 2019 academic year. In the following academic year there were 211 Romani children and 225 Egyptian who did not attend. The REDs of Fier, Korça, and Lezha did not report of any unregistered children of Romani or Egyptian ethnicity.

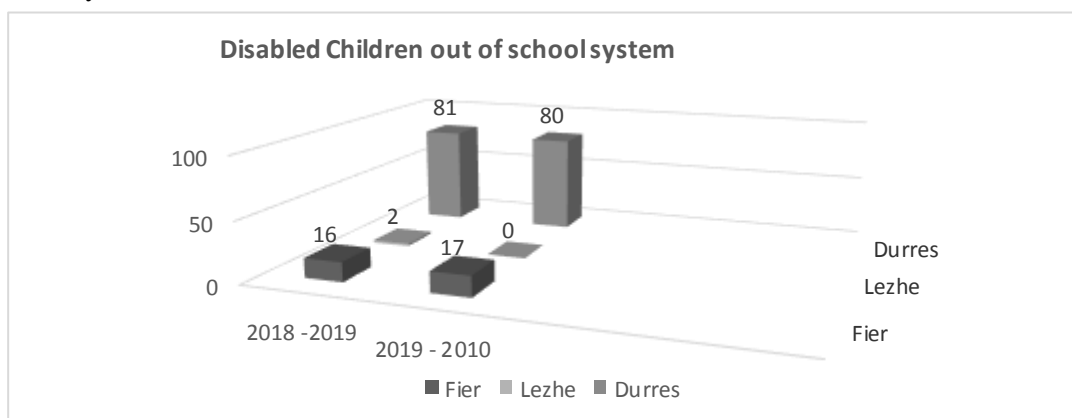


Figure 3. Disabled Children out of school system

Gender disaggregated OOSC data in the municipalities of Shkodra and Korça indicate that the number of boys leaving school is higher in Shkodra while in Korça this number is higher for girls as it is shown in the figures below:

Figure 4. Gender disaggregated OOSC data in the municipality of Shkodra

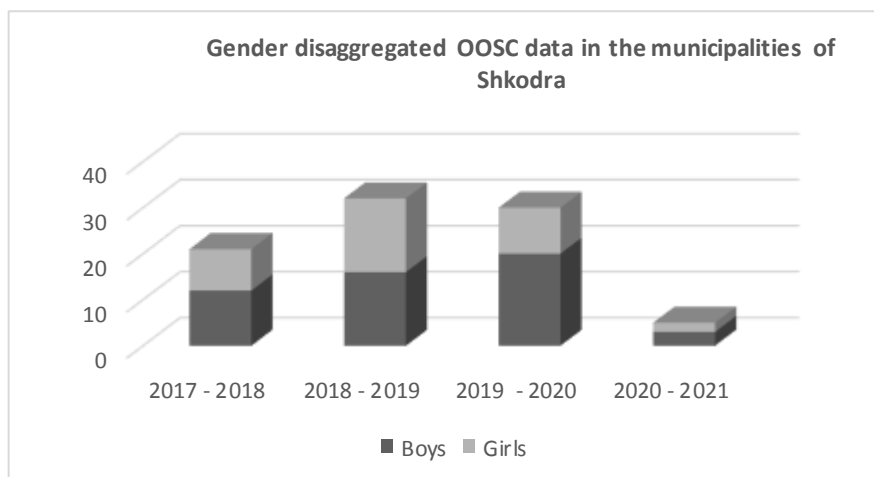
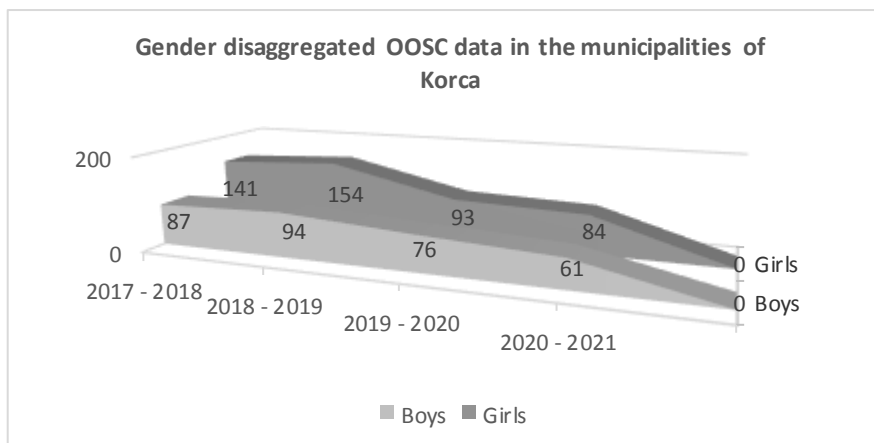


Figure 5. Gender disaggregated OOSC data in the municipality of Korca



Reported data are indicative of an OOSC decline in Albania. On the other hand, there are problems with municipal periodic reporting of OOSC and school dropout data including proper identification of children at risk of dropout.

**Findings**

141 children from 6 cities Tirana, Berat, Durrës, Bulqiza, Peshkopi and Korça participated in this study. 53% of children are girls and 47% are boys.

The family composition and functioning are very important factors that contribute to drop out. The data show that parental employment is also a contributing factor to the lack of financial stability of the family. A high percentage of children have unemployed parents, 27% of fathers and 47% have mothers, or with irregular employment. One in ten children has one or both parents part-time or full-time employed, 16% of fathers and 19% of mothers respectively.

The school represents another important eco-system related to the education of the children and their psycho-social support. When the children were asked about their relationship with the school 32% responded that they wanted to go to school; 30% responded that they kind of wanted to attend school; 37% of them did not like going to school and 9% hated going to school.

Survey data show that out-of-school children interviewed are children coming from vulnerable groups facing problems of violence and bullying. They were exposed to violence in family relationships, school, and community. 15% of the children who were interviewed were classified by the interviewer as children coming from a situation of violence. The most common form of bullying encountered by almost one in two children was verbal violence from peers that ranks closely with peer exclusion.

### **Conclusions**

The monitoring of the reports shows the lack of accurate and unreliable statistics for out-of school children for each municipality and the reported figures do not consider children who have left the country but are still registered in the civil registry. Establishing a sustainable system of norms, procedures, criteria, and institutional and community responsibilities to reduce school dropout and increase the level of education of children and young people remains a challenge for Albania, although steps have been taken to consolidate the educational system, to increase the qualifications and training of pedagogical staff, and to inform parents about financial support for OOSC.

Poverty is the common denominator of all typologies of out-of-school children created through the analysis of survey responses of 141 OOSC, however all other elements such as ethnicity or living in a violent environment should be taken into consideration in both identifying the problem and assessing and addressing it. The analysis showed that children from the Roma and Egyptian communities face more prejudice and are less engaged in school life. Meanwhile children coming from the violent

environment need greater protection as they feel more insecure. The cultural context in which Roma and Egyptian children live makes them more vulnerable as their parents are less educated and less employed but at the same time their community affiliation offers them a greater sense of support and care. This perception helps them cope better with the different forms of bullying.

The community, parents and every member of society have a direct and indirect impact on the empowerment and effectiveness of the dropout prevention scheme. Continuous information of these actors can affect family and community safety, whether or not to motivate children to go to school or to refer cases of children who are in a school dropout situation.

Raising ongoing awareness and information on child support programs with scholarships or services to facilitate their school attendance should be an integral part of informing and raising public awareness on dropout issues. The work of identifying abandoned children requires that each actor in the scheme coordinates and organizes joint efforts in order to identify children at risk of abandonment.

The psychosocial sector in the school, among others, has the task of identifying cases of children who have long absences from school for no reason, or come from families with social problems and families which may affect their attendance at school. The study shows that this sector is very little present in identifying these children and building individual development plans to help them. Also, their partnership with the teacher in assessing the status of the Child in dropout situation is almost absent in all the experiences reported in the report. One of the report recommendations is to strengthen the role of the school psychologist and social worker in coordinating joint institutional efforts to identify and assess children at risk of school dropout. Also, a more active involvement of the entire psychosocial service network in the process of identifying, evaluating and supporting all cases.

According to the report, the most vulnerable groups of children left out of school are children with various social problems, children of Roma and Egyptian minorities, children who work to help their families, children who are not registered in the civil registry, etc. Educational institutions can play an irreplaceable role in preventing school dropout. These children are the ones who are often absent from school, sometimes for long periods of time. However, the definition of “school dropout child” is perceived to be not very clear among professionals implementing the scheme by identifying the need to clarify the characteristics of children at risk of dropout.

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[https://observator.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/korca\\_botim.pdf](https://observator.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/korca_botim.pdf)
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- <https://isciweb.org/the-data/publications/country-reports/country-reports-of-the-third-wave-2016-2019/>.

## **Legal framework and policies related to social services in Albania**

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### **Abstract**

The changes taking place in the social care system in Albania should demonstrate Albania's readiness to become a modern European state. This means that the developing system of social care should be built on the principles of equal access to social care services acceptable to individuals and groups, continuous improvement of access and quality of service. The article aims to describe and analyze the policies and the legal framework in the historical context of the development of social services with the main focus on children and the family.

The concept of reform has been seen in the plan of the main developments of social services, with the beginning of the establishment of the first social services in 1991-1996, the developments in 2005 where the responsibility for social services was delegated to the level of local government and with the territorial reform and the basket of services provided by the law on social care services in 2016. The social protection strategies that have been approved over the years aimed at reforming the economic assistance scheme for poor families, establishing social services that focused on the individual, the family and the community, protecting children and ensuring the social inclusion of minorities, persons with disabled and elderly.

The analysis includes all the main developments of the legal framework related to social services that has been developed from the 90s until today. All components of the framework, including legal, policy and institutional, are subject to continuous change and updating. In line with efforts to update national legislation in the field of social services, Albania has made progress in drafting/updating policy documents, including strategies, action

plans and other policy documents.

*Keywords: social service, legal framework, children, strategy*

## **Introduction**

The history of social protection in Albania dates back to around 1927, with the first legal act in the field of social security, law no. 129, dated 28. 10. 1927 for "Civil Pensions". The content of this legal act presupposes that there have been, even before, regulatory provisions for pensions. Some foreign companies, operating in Albania, had voluntarily developed the network of protection at work, where a special place was occupied by social insurance from accidents at work. The establishment of a more comprehensive social security system coincided with August 1947, which was improved in 1958 and 1959 on the Soviet model. Then this system was completed and further consolidated in 1966, with the approval and start of implementation of law no. 4171, dated 13. 09. 1966, "On state social security in the RSPSH". From this moment until today, Albania has gone through various situations, which have influenced the development of the social protection system. On the other hand, as far as social work in Albania is concerned, it began to be recognized in the early 1990s, the year after which the creation of the Faculty of Social Sciences in Tirana followed in 1992.

Despite the evidence and the contribution that social services have made to Albania, the historical approach that shows the development of social services is missing. Albanian policies and legislation in the field of social protection of marginalized groups reflect the principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, the Convention on Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Social Charter and the European Charter for Local Autonomy. National social welfare policies have in their philosophy the construction of a network of services to meet the needs or minimize the impact of the negative effects of social phenomena on the categories that seek to benefit from its services.

In Albania, the development of social services has been guided by three essential principles, which have been described as 3D (three-dimensional) reforms, namely: deinstitutionalization, diversification, decentralization, (MMSR. Social Inclusion Policy Document 2015-2020).

Social reforms in Albania were realized through the creation and operation



of social security, poverty reduction, employment and social care programs (Ymeraj, 2011). With a more consolidated political and legal framework (including the passing of law no. 7703, dated 11. 05. 1993 "On social security in the Republic of Albania" and law no. 7710, dated 18. 5. 1993, "On assistance and social support"), the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Social Support and Persecuted Persons, as well as the General Administration of Assistance and Social Services responsible for the implementation of the social support system in the country, were created.

### **Methodology**

To fulfill the purpose and objectives of this study, a mixed methodological approach was selected. Through the use of mixed methods, the study creates a more comprehensive understanding of the study area, which would not be achieved using only one method (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). The methods used to accomplish the aim and objectives of the study are based on the collection and analysis of primary and secondary data. 12 interviews were conducted with key persons and relevant stakeholders in the field of social protection and social services. Semi-structured interviews have been chosen as a good approach to obtain information on a range of important issues. The method of content analysis was used to interpret and categorize the interview data. The data were analyzed independently, identifying, categorizing and coding specific elements of information, dividing certain parts of the data and determining their relationships to each other and to the whole, and thus, identifying general themes.

### **Findings**

#### **Social services reforms**

The changes taking place in the social care system in Albania should demonstrate Albania's readiness to become a modern European state. This means that the social care development system must be built on the principles of equal access to social care services acceptable to individuals and groups, continuous improvement of access and service quality. In order to establish and operate such a system, it is necessary to design and implement appropriate tools that will allow clearly defining responsibilities between levels of public government, creating incentives for careful and efficient use of limited financial resources and ensure control over the results of the social care system.

Post-communist countries in Eastern Europe faced a very difficult task in creating and maintaining adequate social care systems for several general, but also country-specific, reasons. Among the general reasons, the most important are (Todorova, E. 2006):

- the legacy of the past, which ensured a limited, mainly institutional state care and which prohibited any kind of civil society, even those that offered social assistance;
  - the substantial increase in social problems and the need for social care after 1989, with an increasing unemployment, which brought such consequences as: poverty in families and diseases related to stress;
  - increasing economic and fiscal problems for governments, due to high restructuring costs, low tax reporting and, above all, the strength of a shadow economy.
  - loss of important social care services (childcare, retirement centers, etc.).
- Liberalization and economic reforms after the 1990s brought changes to the entire socio-economic structure of the country.

### ***The first reform of social services***

The design and realization of the first reform faced the need to harmonize the relations between the developments of the market economy, the development of institutions and new social relations. Preparation of law no. 7710, 1993, "On social assistance and care" came as a response to a very great need to provide monetary benefits to poor families, which faced new social and economic conditions. The economic assistance program in Albania was created to mitigate the effects caused by the transition from a centralized economy to a market economy. This reform represented a challenge, given that the services would have to be developed responding to the new social needs, also based on the approach of citizens' rights. The first reform of social services focused mainly on the economic assistance program, as the closure of many state-owned enterprises caused mass unemployment.

An important achievement during this phase was related to the fact that some of the services and functions of direct benefit to the public were transferred to local bodies, together with more administrative and financial autonomy. However, compared to the stability of political autonomy, fiscal and administrative autonomy remained very limited.

The first reform, supported by the World Bank, took place during the years 1991-1996, with the creation of new legislation for social assistance and care, as well as the establishment of new principles for this reform. The

principles imposed by that reform were: 1) decentralization and 2) deinstitutionalization, which took time to be implemented in the territory (Sota and others, 2019).

According to the interviewed participants, deinstitutionalization will be an issue that will receive more development in subsequent reforms of social services. Even according to the World Bank report (2006), one of the areas that required attention was the support of decentralization and deinstitutionalization of social care services.

*Experts in the field of policies state that, at the beginning, the reform of social services did not emphasize services, but economic assistance, because the economic and social conditions of the period when the economic assistance law was prepared, required finding an emergency solution, especially for those who were left without work as a result of the closure of enterprises. Despite the fact that the law that was adopted in 1993 was called "The Law of Assistance and Social Services", it provided only some basic provisions related to social services.*

### ***The second reform of social services***

Since 2005, the responsibility for the management of social care services in Albania has been delegated to the local government level, with a series of regional structures responsible for the distribution of social services. In the conditions that the district, municipalities and communes did not have experience in this new field of their activity, the establishment of standards would help them in fulfilling the new functions related to the fulfillment of social needs in the community, where they exercised authority. These functions were related to planning, the provision of social services and the development of local or regional cooperation networks. The roles of decentralization and deinstitutionalization were further developed during this reform. In the 2005 strategy, we defined some elements related to deinstitutionalization, making a more complete assessment of the cases that would go to residential institutions. Decentralization was accompanied by greater responsibilities for municipalities, but also for governance at regional levels. Therefore, we have an increase in the number of services that must be provided at the local level and an expansion of services at the district level as well. During this phase, the first protection services for children were also piloted, where several international and national organizations advocated for the strengthening and expansion of the child protection system.

Economic assistance and services are related to the concept of categories in need, which have limited economic, physical and psychological opportunities, as well as limited social skills. In the law no. 9355, dated 10. 03. 2005, "On social assistance and services", it is determined that economic assistance and social services are aimed at alleviating poverty and reducing social exclusion for individuals and families, as well as creating opportunities for their integration. The law also defines decentralization as one of the essential principles underlying the scheme of economic assistance and social services, together with the principles of universality, equality, respect and guarantee of human values, integrity, transparency, neutrality, social integration and non-discrimination.

While progress has been made in legislation and policy development to improve social protection, health and education in Albania, implementation of laws and policies lags behind. One of the missing links between policy formulation and implementation was the lack of by-laws, standards and care protocols, which should be based on international standards. Current strategies are constantly reviewed and new ones are created in parallel (NSSD, 2003).

Although these reform efforts aim to create new bodies and strengthen governance at the regional level, the roles of the District Council have not been so clear and have affected its effectiveness. At the same time, the increased responsibility for the provision of social services in the poor areas of Albania was not accompanied by appropriate budgeting. Many local governments had no interest in identifying groups at risk (including children), as long as they could not directly or indirectly support them. This was also related to the fact that at the local level, where services had to be implemented and needs identified, bottom-up communication channels were slow and difficult (UNICEF, 2007).

### ***The third reform of social services***

In the framework of all developments, the need for the reorientation of local actors towards new roles of assessment, planning, provision and management of social services, making available the appropriate tools for assessment of needs, planning for the decentralization of social services and monitoring strategies at the local level was a must. Within the priorities of social protection policies, the decentralization of social services and deinstitutionalization were the main processes of reforming social services. From this point of view, the development of social services policies should go parallel to the decentralization process. Financial decentralization and

the ability of local units to formulate and implement regional policies, as well as the latter's cooperation with civil society, are some of the sharpest challenges. The economic assistance program accounts for the largest share of the central government's social protection budget, and the funding of social services is practically limited to the funding of residential services. More and more different actors have expressed the need, that a larger part of the budget should go to social care services, in order to support the integration of vulnerable groups through proactive means and ways. The social fund is a very good opportunity to support initiatives for social care services at the local and regional level. Local institutions have increased their competences for the administration and provision of social services, but, on the other hand, they are faced with a lack of human resources capacities, with a lack of financing of developed social plans, limited social services and which, mainly, are covered from civil society organizations, as well as with the concern for the lack of a dividing line between the responsibilities of local and central government.

*The third reform reflects the political-economic developments of the country and this is also reflected in the diversity of the provision of social services. Civil society organizations continue to provide social services to many vulnerable groups, often replacing the missing services of state institutions. (Quoted by a representative of the organization).*

Civil society organizations have played a very important role in providing social services and supporting groups in need since the early 1990s and in subsequent periods. Many of the national and international organizations have often covered with services areas and groups of beneficiaries, who have not had access to services, and have been constantly changing in the light of current social, political, cultural and technological developments. The need for cooperation and partnership between state institutions, civil society organizations, businesses has been increasing, to guarantee that government actors respect the principles of equality and non-discrimination, guaranteeing effective transparency, public participation and accountability.

*Social workers have been part of the advocacy process and have influenced the improvement of the provision of social services in various fields. The need for greater involvement of social workers has often led to job descriptions for certain positions in organizations requiring professionals with a social work profile. (Quoted by a social worker).*

The Administrative Territorial Reform aimed at "increasing the efficiency, quality and standards of service delivery and fair territorial development by

enabling greater human and financial resources, increasing local responsibilities and competences and directing them towards a more transparent and more comprehensive". (Intersectoral National Strategy for Decentralization and Local Governance, 2015-2020).

### **Conclusions**

The creation of a new system for social protection in Albania came after the drastic changes of the overthrow of one of the harshest communist dictatorships in the world. As in other countries in transition, also in Albania, the development of social services after the 90s has been guided by three essential principles, which have been described as 3D (three-dimensional) reforms, namely: deinstitutionalization, diversification and decentralization.

The legal framework has been developed in a progressive way over the years, but not always the implementing institutions have had the institutional capacities to reflect it in their daily work practices. The support of civil society organizations has been significant for increasing the capacities of staff on the new legal framework, in the publication of various manuals and guides, and in meeting the needs that arose during the implementation of the legal framework.

The current system of social services aims at increasing the quality, availability and effectiveness of social services, strengthening and institutionalizing relations between the state and civil society, expanding the responsibilities of local government for the establishment of new social services and the inclusion of civil society as service providers, as and the cooperation of the central government, local government and civil society for the establishment of services to improve the lives of groups in need

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## **From Medical to Bio-Psycho-Social Assessment of Disability in Albania: The Need to Transform the Traditional Model**

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### **Abstract**

Along with health, disability is an old phenomenon for human society. According to WHO (2021), about 1 billion people worldwide have some type of disability, of which 2-4% have severe functional impairment. In Albania, State Social Service (2023) reported 71.056 citizens with mental or physical disability, paraplegia- tetraplegia and blindness during 2022. Disability assessment and treatment has changed overtime and has been subject of debate by professionals and researchers. There are at least three core models of disability assessment- medical, social and bio-psycho-social. Assessment of disability in Albania was based on the traditional medical model until 2019. Since November 2019 State Social Service started implementing the bio-psycho-social model of disability assessment in Tirana, extending afterwards to all districts at the end of 2022. The aim of this paper is to present the emerging need to transform the assessment model from medical to bio-psycho-social and describe how the bio-psycho-social model is developing in Albania. Conclusions are based on literature review. The traditional disability assessment model was ineffective, fragmented, highly abusive, bureaucratic and non-interactive with other important social protection systems. In response to the need to make the assessment system effective and efficient, MHSP started the implementation of the bio-psycho-social model, through 37 multi-disciplinary teams near citizen's residence. Each multi-disciplinary team has a doctor and a social worker in order to provide an assessment that covers the biological aspects and psycho-social needs as well. The multi-disciplinary team provides a holistic assessment, sets cash payment level and recommends services in accordance to medical conditions. It is too early to talk about tangible results because the implementation of the bio-



psycho-social model of disability assessment in Albania is in its first steps. Therefore, this process will require continuous monitoring to detect problems and address them in time.

*Key words: Disability, Assessment, Medical, Bio-psycho-social, Albania.*

## **Introduction**

Along with health, disability is an old phenomenon for human society. 1 of 4 European adults have a disability (Europe Council, 2022). The number of people with disabilities is reported to be particularly high in developing countries (World Bank, 2022). In Albania at the end of 2022, about 71.056 citizens have mental or physical disability, para-tetraplegia, and blindness (State Social Service, 2023). On the first two months of 2023, State Social Service reported 71.135 disabled people throughout Albania (ibid).

Disability assessment and treatment has changed overtime. The oldest model of disability assessment is the medical model. The medical model has traditionally been the most common model for disability assessment. This model reflects disability as a biological problem (Petasis, 2019; Dan, 2021). Disability is only a medical condition (Kofi Amponsah, 2013) and a direct consequence of physical or mental impairments of an individual, therefore the solution can be found if we focus on the individual (Hogan, 2019; Suleiman et al., 2021). The only solution to eliminate or alleviate the problems are the health facilities provided by doctors, nurses or other health care providers (Howard, 2003). In the context of social welfare, the medical model of disability assessment is a system where eligibility criteria to benefit disability cash benefits or services are entirely medical (Chiu et al., 2013). Disability assessment is conducted only by doctors referring to impairments in bodily structures (Yen et al., 2012). People with disability receive the same benefits from the Social Protection Programs, regardless of their health status, usually cash benefits only (MSHMS, 2018).

The opposite approach to the medical model was developed in 1983 by Mike Oliver (Oliver, 1990). The social model shifts the meaning of disability from the individual to society. The assumption underlying the social model is that disability is the result of persistent social and political barriers (Waddel & Aylward, 2010; Sisti, 2015; Nathan & Jeffrey, 2018). People with disabilities are always in an unfavoured position because of some societal beliefs, attitudes or perceptions that create obstacles to integrate into society (Travis 2015; Goering, 2015). According to the social

model, the solution is the elimination of discrimination against people with disability and improvement of policies, legislations, programs or strategies that will enable equal treatment in all areas (Parlais, 2013). Thus, the social model focuses on the social aspect of disability, underestimating the influence of the biological factors.

Each of these models have some disadvantages in the assessment of disability. The medical model focuses on the biological aspects only, while the social model focuses only on the social aspect of disability. These models underestimate the influence of other factors in disability. Due to these shortcomings, in 1977 was developed the bio-psycho-social model of disability. This paradigm was first developed in the field of psychiatry (Engels, 1977). Engels believed that in the field of psychiatry, the explanation and treatment of morbidity could not be based only on biological aspects. For this reason, Engels emphasized that disease treatment should cover three aspects: the medical, psychological and social (Gritti, 2017). In his article entitled "*From biomedical to bio-psycho-social*", Engels (1977) writes that his bio-psycho-social model allows disease to be explained based on an interaction at the cellular, tissue, organ, interpersonal and environmental, as an integral part of the big system. The bio-psycho-social model does not dismiss the useful aspects of the medical and social model, but it states that a comprehensive model must include several perspectives (Babalola et al., 2017). The bio-psycho-social model summarizes the useful aspects of the medical and social models, without making the mistake of limiting disability to one of those aspects (Ustun et al., 2003). Ghaemi (2011) suggest that the bio-psycho-social model introduces new factors in analysing health. It presents the biological, psychological and social factors and the interactions between them in the production of a health condition. Biological factors are related to physiological pathologies. Psychological factors refer to thoughts, emotions, coping styles and attributions. Social factors refer to family circumstances, work, socio-economic situation, etc. (Engels, 1977).

Engles created the philosophy of the bio-psycho-social model. Edwards et al., (2014) stated that Engels did not create mechanisms, strategies or instruments to implement in practice the bio-psycho-social model of health. The instrument of bio-psycho-social model was first developed by WHO in 2001. This instrument is called ICF (International Classification of Functioning). Currently is used in 191 countries of the world (WHO, 2022). ICF is a classification of health, not a classification of illness. ICF describes health divided in two parts: a) functioning and disability and b) contextual

factors where there are included the personal and environmental factors (WHO, 2001; Road, 2012). According to WHO (2009) ICF does not remove attention from the medical needs of people with disability, but emphasizes the contribution that physical, social or institutional barriers can have in the development of disability.

Albania is currently in a transitional phase, reforming the traditional medical model of disability into the bio-psycho-social model. Reforming the traditional model is in line with the principles of The International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the strategic documents and objectives of Albanian government related to rights of people with disability.

#### *Aim of this Article*

*The aim of this article is to present the emerging need to transform the assessment model from medical to bio-psycho-social and describe how the bio-psycho-social model is developing in Albania.*

#### **Albanian Context – Traditional Model of Disability Assessment and the Need to Reform It**

Statistics reported from State Social Service in Albania show that the number of disabled people in Albania is raising. For the period July-August 2022, Albania counted about 70,123 people with disabilities, divided according to the categories of mental and physical disabilities, pre-tetraplegic and blind (SHSSH, 2022). As we reported earlier, during the first two months of 2023 this number increased with at least 1000 disability beneficiaries (SHSSH, 2023).

The disability assessment model in Albania until November 2019 has been the traditional medical model and its reform has been vital for the improvement of all aspects that did not work in almost three decades. The medical model implemented in Albania since 1993 was a fragmented model that focused mostly on assessing loss of work capacity rather than level of functioning or need for support and services (UNDP, 2014). In other words, this fragmented system only provided cash benefits to people with disabilities, and these cash benefits themselves had a number of problems. Disabled people in the Social Protection Program were treated with the same amount of cash benefit (first or second group) regardless of the level of their impairment and the possibility to engage in society (Decision of Ministers no. 618, dated 7.09.2006 "*For the determination of the criteria, documentation and amount of cash benefits for people with disabilities*"). Regardless of age (child or adult), the amount of cash benefits was the

same (MSHMS, 2019).

According to MSHMS (2018) this disability assessment model was ineffective, highly abusive, overly bureaucratic, non-digitalized, expensive and non-interactive with other important social protection systems or re-integration schemes through employment, education, etc. MSHMS (2019) in the *"Policy Document for Reforming the Disability Scheme"* states that the level of abuse in the medical assessment scheme has been and remains very high. In 2018, the control group set up to detect abusive cases checked 14,431 cases, of which 1,250 were problematic.

The assessment procedure is long, complicated and sometimes impossible for citizens to follow (UNPD, 2014; MSHMS, 2019). The Diabetes Association of Albania (2022) has labelled the medical assessment model too bureaucratic in the procedural aspects that citizens must follow, often making it impossible for them to receive all the benefits they are entitled to according to the legislation. In the medical model of disability assessment, a person with a disability must complete medical documentation after admission to the tertiary health system (except for blindness). After completing the medical documents, the citizen must send it to the office of the social administrator in the administrative unit where he/she lives. The administrative unit forwards it to the Regional Directorate of State Social Service, from where it is forwarded to the disability evaluation commission for evaluation. After the decision-making, the documentation is forwarded back again to the Regional Directorate of State Social Service, which sends it to the local unit for administration (Decision of Ministers no. 618, dated 07.09.2006 *"On the determination of the criteria, documentation and amount of cash benefits for people with disabilities"*). In addition to being a long procedure, UNDP (2014) has seen it as a complicated procedure as the number of disability offices was insufficient and the geographical distance was inconvenient for people with disabilities.

The existing assessment criteria were only medical, which contradicts the WHO concept of disability as a condition produced by the interaction between medical, psycho-social and environmental aspects, as well as the definitions made in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which Albania ratified in 2012 (Law no. 108/2012 *"On the Ratification of the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities"*). Among other things, medical criteria do not distinguish between adults and children, making children and adults to be assessed the same way even though disability affects them differently (UNDP, 2014; MSHMS, 2019).

### **Establishment and Functioning of the Bio-Psycho-Social Model of Disability Assessment in Albania**

Based on the need to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of assessment, reduce abuse and costs, improve service for citizens and to reflect the concept of disability as an interaction of bio-psycho-social factors, in 2019 Albania officially embraced a new model for assessing disability, the bio-psycho-social model (MSHMS, 2019). The fundamental reform of the disability assessment model was carried out through the World Bank Project for "Modernization of Social Assistance in Albania", which aimed to support Albania for the implementation of reforms to improve the quality and efficiency of social assistance programs (World Bank, 2012; Byrne et al., 2021). In fact, the bio-psycho-social model of disability assessment was piloted in Administrative Unit no. 6 and no. 7 in Tirana since 2017, approved by the Decision of Ministers no. 431, dated 08.06.2016 *"On determining the criteria, documentation, procedures and amount of cash benefit and the personal assistant and the responsible structures and their duties in the pilot areas"* and since November 2019 continuous extension has started throughout Albania (MSHMS, 2019). After the district of Tirana, in the autumn of 2021 the bio-psycho-social model was successfully extended to the districts of Durrës and Elbasan (SHSSH, 2022). At the end of 2022 the extension of the reform to the remaining nine districts was realized (SHSSH, 2023).

The bio-psycho-social model of disability assessment in Albania brings a new approach to people with disabilities. This new approach brings innovation in the way the assessment is carried out, the procedure that is followed, the benefits that can be obtained from this assessment and the possibilities of integration. Currently, approximately 15.000 from 71.135 people with disabilities entered in the new bio-psycho-social model of disability assessment.

*The bio-psycho-social model introduces for the first time the concept of multi-disciplinary teams.* In contrast to the medical model of disability assessment where the team is compounded of doctors only, the bio-psycho-social model is based on multi-disciplinary teams of doctors and social workers (MSHMS, 2019; National Strategy for PWD 2021-2025; Otte et al., 2022). The team consists of a doctor, a social worker and a Head of the Assessment Offices who must hold a degree in medicine or social work (ILO, 2021). Along with the Regional Multi-Disciplinary teams, there are two Complaint Review Team. These Complaint Review Team assess people

with disabilities that do not agree with the benefit level set up by the Regional Multi-Disciplinary teams or people with disabilities who think that they have been denied to the right to benefit (Observatori për Mbrojtjen e të Drejtave të Fëmijëve, 2021). The third and last Complaint Review Team will be established within 2023. Complaint Review Team is also a multi-disciplinary team, which has a doctor and two social workers. *The assessment offices are located near the residence of people with disability.* The number of assessment offices is calculated according to the number of people with disability in each district. 36 assessment offices located throughout Albania are providing assessment services for people with disabilities.

Table 1. Data about number and geographic distribution of Disability Offices throughout Albania

<i>District</i>	<i>Number of Disability Offices</i>	<i>Offices Location</i>
Tirana	6	5 in Tirana, 1 in Kavaja
Durrës	3	2 in Durrës, 1 in Krujë
Elbasan	6	2 in Elbasan, 1 in Gostima, 1 in Pajova, 1 in Librazhd, 1 in Gramsh
Lezhë	3	2 in Lezhë, 1 in Milot
Berat	2	1 in Berat, 1 in Dimal
Gjirokastër	1	1 in Gjirokastër
Kukës	1 (1)	1 in Kukës (1 will probably be located in Tropoja in the future)
Fier	4	3 in Fier, 1 in Lushnje
Korçë	3	2 in Korça, 1 in Pogradec
Dibër	2	1 in Dibër, 1 in Mat
Vlorë	3	2 in Vlora, 1 in Saranda
Shkodër	3	2 in Shkodra, 1 in Puka

The multi-disciplinary teams are distributed throughout the country, and redistributed within each district in order to guarantee that this service is as close as possible to people with disabilities. For example, in Elbasan District there are 6 assessment offices, from which 2 are located in Elbasan, 1 in Gostima, 1 in Gramsh, 1 in Pajova and 1 in Librazhd. As we mentioned earlier, the number of disability offices varies due to the number of people

of disability. As can be analyzed from the table above, Tirana and Elbasan Districts have the largest number of disabled people, while Gjirokastra has the lowest number.

*The documentation required for the application has been simplified.* In accordance with the legislation, the citizen who wants to apply for benefits of disability should start the procedure from the general doctor (named family doctor in Albania), then to the specialist doctor in accordance to their diagnosis. These doctors will complete the forms of disability assessment where they describe the medical information about the patient, medication, and suggest a level of limitations in activities and participation. These forms, along with the medical examinations, are submitted by the citizen to the Disability Assessment Office that covers his area of residence. Hospitalisation in tertiary structures is no longer required to apply for disability benefits.

*Disability assessment procedure is simply and fast.* Within 30 days from the submission day, the multi-disciplinary team conducts the interview with the disabled person. The interview explores deeply the level of functioning of the disabled person in different aspects such as: selfcare, domestic life, mobility, general activities, engagement in social life, relationships, education or work integration etc. Based on the medical documentation and the conducted interview, the multi-disciplinary team determines the level of limitation of the disabled person to carry out activities of daily life in accordance to their age. The assessment (either by family doctors and specialists, or by the multi-disciplinary team) is based on the two manuals of disability assessment for adults and children/adolescents (MSHMS, 2019). Bio-Psycho-Social Assessment Manuals for Children and Adults describe the criteria to benefit from disability programme. At the end of the assessment procedure, the multi-disciplinary team generates the decision that gives or denies the cash benefits, and recommends services when appropriate. Even the Complaint Review Team reviews the complaints within 30 days.

*Cash benefits from disability has changed.* In the medical model in Albania, we had only two categories of cash benefits, named “first group” (cash benefit for the disabled and personal assistant) and “second group” (cash benefit for the disabled only). Distribution of benefits in two categories was not fair because regardless the level of limitations, people with disabilities got the same amount of financial support. Bio-psycho-social model introduces 4 level of cash benefits according to the level of limitations in performing every day activities. The cash benefits levels decreased for

those who do not have high limitations and increased for those whose limitations strongly affect their quality of life. The redistribution of cash payments in 4 categories leads to a fair treatment of people with disabilities. Everyone will get a cash benefit in accordance to their limitations. Those who have more limitations will have the highest cash benefit. On the other side, these changes in cash benefits have led to a high number of complaints. Since 2021, the Complaints Review Team reviewed more than 2000 complaints.

*Different assessment for children and adults.* Two of the main innovations of the bio-psychosocial model of disability in Albania are the involvement of children aged 0-2 years old in disability assessment, and the differentiated benefits for children and adults. In the medical model children aged 0-2 years old were not assessed. On the other side, we are aware that children and adults are not affected in the same way from disability. The bio-psycho-social model of disability assessment overcomes this shortcoming. Cash benefits are different for children due to the fact that parents are responsible for their growth. Cash benefit for children is 75 % of the cash benefit of adults (MSHMS, 2019).

*Integrated services and the procedure of receiving them.* The multi-disciplinary team, along with cash benefits, can recommend integrated services such as assistive teachers, daily or residential social services, employment services, vocational trainings services, assistive tools, physiotherapy, psychotherapy, etc. Decision of Minister no. 722, dated 11.11.2019 "*For the determination of the amount, criteria, procedures and documentation for the evaluation and benefits of disability, the personal assistant, and the responsible structures and their duties*" sets responsibility to follow up recommended services to the administrative unit. Currently, the referral mechanism to the recommended services is not developed yet.

*Lack of integrated services.* One of the biggest challenges encountered is the lack of services. In Albania, the network of integrated services is still underdeveloped (MSHMS, 2019). Cani (2018) talks about little or no services at all. Current services do not cover the needs at the national level. The only service that covers the needs of people with disabilities across the country is the personal assistant service. Services financed by the public sector are very few in number and represent about 46% of all services (Hartley, 2011; Byrnes et al., 2021). The majority of social services are provided by NGOs (Rama, 2020) and this does not guarantee sustainability in the provision of services in the long term (Hartley, 2011).

UNICEF (2017) in a study conducted on services for children with



disabilities concluded that free services (therapies) are insufficient to be successful in early intervention. Only 28 percent of children with disabilities had access to social services and access was lower for children living in rural areas compared to urban areas as problems with transportation to service delivery centres are reported (Rama, 2020; ILO, 2021). According to a study conducted by World Vision and Save the Children (2018), there are many children who do not receive any services, while parents state that the costs of services are too high and the payments received are too low.

*Undertaken efforts to develop services.* In the framework of the new bio-psycho-social model of disability, there are several undertaken efforts to develop services. The Social Fund aims to support the local government for the establishment of social services, the development of social policies and the improvement of existing social services (Law no. 121/2016 “*On Social Care Services in the Republic of Albania*”; Social Protection Strategy 2020-2023). This fund was established due to difficulties in financing social care services (ILO, 2021). Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2022) declares that through this mechanism 40 social services in the territory for 10 thousand beneficiaries have been supported so far.

In addition to Social Fund, at the end of 2022 several Cooperation Agreements were signed with important structures of integrated services. Specifically:

Local government (for social care services);

Regional educational directorates (for education services);

Regional employment directorates (for employment or vocational training services);

Regional Directorates of the Mandatory Health Insurance Fund (for specialized health services, rehabilitation, tools or assistive technology, hygiene-sanitary packages, etc.).

Each Cooperation Agreement sets the responsibilities and tasks of each actor in providing recommended services from the multi-disciplinary team. These agreements are valid for 2 years and results will be monitored throughout.

## **Conclusions**

The establishment of the bio-psycho-social model of disability assessment in Albania is in line with the developments in the rights of people with disability, the concept and principles of the International Convention for the

Rights of People with Disabilities, and the Albanian government engagement to guarantee the rights of people with disabilities. The bio-psycho-social approach in Albania was supported by World Bank Project “Modernisation of Social Assistance” and reflects the best practices used in developed countries.

The bio-psycho-social model of disability assessment is proved that brings several innovations, such as: fast, simply and non-bureaucratic procedure, no more waiting time to get assessed and take benefits, children aged 0-2 years old are assessed, the necessary documentation has been facilitated since hospitalization is not necessary to apply, benefits are different in accordance to age and limitations.

On the other side of the innovations, there are several challenges to overcome. Cash benefits in the bio-psycho-social model of disability assessment tend to decrease comparing to the medical model, leading to a great high number of complaints. As mentioned earlier, approximately 15.000 people with disability felt the effects of the disability model reform, while more than 50.000 still benefit from the medical model. The situation should be under continuous monitoring because it is not known how the changes will be expected from the majority of people with disabilities that are not affected yet.

Integrated services, which are a strong base and justification of the bio-psycho-social model of disability, are not developed yet. We are counting on the services provided by NGOs despite some services funded by the Social Fund. The Cooperation Agreements with structures of services are still in their first steps. They were signed in the last days of 2022 and need to develop mechanisms to provide the services recommended by the multi-disciplinary teams. The implementation of the bio-psycho-social model throughout Albania is in its first phases. Apart integrated services development, it is strongly recommended for this model to be monitored continuously and assessed periodically in order to be implemented successfully according to developed countries practices. In time-detection of problems helps to take measures for an effective model.

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